

Revenge of the Grand Narrative: The Ethics of Authorship as a Metaphysics of Meaning



Richard Rosenbaum

Overture

This is an ongoing project.

The topic at hand – the ethics of authorship in narrative fiction – is an incredibly expansive and complex one. My decision to take advantage of the project option has been an excellent and enlightening method to deal with some of these issues, but also has its own limitations. For the first part of this project I have written a novella in which I introduce and dramatize the discourse by raising some of these questions in a metafictional way within the story itself. In the second part, I discuss these same issues from a theoretical perspective, as a meditation incorporating mainly Literary and Communications Theory and Philosophy. In the third and final part, I attempt to create a synthesis of the first two parts by combining narrative and theoretical elements with an explanation of some of the thoughts and ideas I, as author of the piece, was trying to get across to the reader through character, action, symbolism, etc.

Working on this project has been an illuminating experience for me. Not only do I feel I have learned a great deal about the topic in my work to answer the questions at hand, but I have also grown as a fiction writer through the process of discovering how to communicate my ideas most effectively in prose while keeping the writing entertaining and keeping the more abstruse and academic components for the theoretical section.

That said, it also became clear to me very early on that this very fact also makes it necessary that this project remain a work-in-progress, and to some extent incomplete. The scope of it increases precisely as I try to pin it down. As such, this should not be regarded as a closed and finalized work, but one that is still open to addition, modification and further attention in general. It is a work very much still in progress. Please keep this in mind.

This project in some ways explicates what has, to me, been obvious for a long time but somehow left unsaid: in the words of novelist Haruki Murakami, “communication is existence.” The relationship between communication (writing in particular) and existence is investigated in both the narrative and theoretical portions of the project that follows, but in many ways it is a subject that has been important to me both as a person and as a writer for much of my life.

Writing has always been the way in which I've communicated most comfortably and most urgently. My mother tells me that when I was four years old I brought her a sheet of paper covered with illegible crayon scribbles, told her that I wrote a story and I wanted her to read it. She couldn't read it, of course, as it probably barely resembled English. But the fact that she couldn't read it, that she didn't understand what I'd been trying to communicate, apparently upset me very much at the time. Since then I've calmed down (a bit) and my grammar has improved, but I nevertheless have this deep need to be understood.

And yet I also have this difficulty with people. It isn't that I'm afraid to express myself to others personally, it's more that the kinds of things I often want to say don't sound so nice to people all the time. I can come off as heartless, or obsessive, and very frequently I've offended people who object to my sometimes unpopular opinions, who don't appreciate my sense of humour, or with whom I just don't have anything in common. I'm sure these experiences are not unique to me, of course, the point is just that when I feel like I have something that needs to be expressed, writing has always been the most natural mode for me. That's not to say that it's easy, but it's easier than most of the alternatives. I still have to wrestle with it, but I'm wrestling with myself, or the page, or the hidden thing that's trying to express itself through me – but that thing doesn't judge and I don't have to worry about it getting offended or not wanting to be friends with me anymore, for instance.

Probably in large part this is because I come to understand the world through stories. I experience it through living it, but I make sense of it with metaphors and archetypes. Narrative fiction has this ability to simultaneously distill and yet expand the world into chunks with seemingly holographic depth and yet which can be so easily applied to the actual reality in which we live that it's almost spooky. That's something in which I want to participate: the creation of new meanings. New ways to understand, and better versions of the old ways. Because that's the only way I've ever managed to understand anything, and I think that's important. Besides which, I've learned that creative people are the most interesting people, and through being involved with creative communities (opened up to me by participating in classes and events for writers and other artists to meet), my life has been utterly enriched by meeting others who feel the same way about communication and existence as I do, not to mention how much I have learned about writing by becoming privy to the creative processes of other writers whose work I admire.

So: I want to be a writer. I've written short stories, novels, screenplays and teleplays, comics books, animated shorts, and about a million non-fiction articles and essays. Many of these have been for academic purposes, and a handful of them have even been published. I've also written a few poems, all of which have been terrible, so I don't do that anymore. My ultimate goal is to write fiction professionally, make a living at it and participate in the creative culture of this country and the world.. As a matter of fact, my main reason for choosing the Communication and Culture program when applying for my Master's rather than, say, Literatures of Modernity, was because of the Project Paper option; whereas in Literatures of Modernity I could study and write about literature, and in the MFA program in Creative Writing at York I could work exclusively on my writing, in ComCult I could do both of those things while also broadening the scope of my studies: not only literature but media, philosophy, literary theory, etc, could all be part of my studies and I could take all of these components and express my ideas and what I've learned about them in a creative work! It was a very appealing

concept because I want my work to mean something, and not just in an abstract way. I want my work to mean something to the people who live in this world suffused in every sort of media, eyeballs-deep in pop culture, whose lives move along the splinters of post-modern narratives.

This project has been an enormous boon to my desires and intentions in that sphere. Not only have I been able to crystallize so many of the divergent thoughts and ideas that I've had during my two years in ComCult into this work and see connections between concepts that I otherwise would have had no way to reconcile, but the process of writing this piece has improved my writing incredibly. Just in quantitative terms, I've written more these past four months than I have in any period in my life before. Having hard deadlines has focused my mind considerably, and the application of the sorts of constraints necessary for making this piece worthy of a Master's Degree has forced me to be creative in new directions. I've been able to explore experimental avenues in my writing as they felt appropriate, while always keeping an eye on the ultimate goal and what this work was intended to be, and required to be.

I'll relate a story that I hope shows what I mean: there's a video game that was released in 1997 for the Sony PlayStation called Final Fantasy VII. It's a role-playing game with an intensely complicated plot, a huge cast of fully fleshed-out and sympathetic characters, and some serious philosophical concerns. And yet at the same time, the gameplay mechanics are fairly standard for a game in its genre. I've done more than a bit of research and work in ComCult on video games as well as other narrative forms of new media, but it is the application of these genre rules to an otherwise realistic (or at least internally consistent) story world proves perfectly why and how storytelling, and in particular *new ways* of storytelling, have enhanced my own understanding of how my life and the world around me functions. In most role-playing games there is a system of "Experience Points," whereby achieving certain objectives numerically increases these points by a given amount depending on the difficulty of the task. There will be many smaller challenges, ultimately leading up to a "boss" encounter, usually a battle with a monster that is significantly stronger than any that have come before. The system is set up

so that you, the player character, can run around doing certain tasks and gaining Experience Points until you “level up,” that is, pass a designated threshold of points beyond which the character's powers and skills rise sharply in a sort of quantum leap. Strength may go up from 12 to 14, Hit Points may increase from 100 to 200, the character may now be able to use certain items or weapons that he wasn't able to use before. The point is that from the character's point of view, he doesn't know anything about these Experience Points or Levels. He's just doing what he needs to do until he is strong enough to take on the next challenge. Only from the player's perspective are these numerical considerations made explicit. Similarly, in real life, we're never really aware of how much experience we need in order to reach “the next level,” but we work and work and improve our skills and increase our experience until we feel prepared. We then tackle the next big challenge. Sometimes we succeed and sometimes we fail, but if we fail we can always go back, run around and kill a few more monsters or solve a few more puzzles, and then try again. The achievement of a Master's Degree is a convenient reification of the concept of gaining a level, but the main point is that working on this project has been, for me, a major Boss Battle. It's demanded the increase of my writing skills, maintaining my self-discipline, and really working to clarify and solidify my ideas into something coherent and purposeful.

This is a convenient metaphor for me in my life in general, and I hope that it shows the sort of way in which my mind works – processing the metaphors I find in art and stories into new ways to think about the world and instructions for myself for how best to live and continue to produce new metaphors with which to interact with this world. As such, this work is still in progress. But I strongly believe that in its current state it expresses what I have learned well enough to show that I have succeeded in completing the intellectual, creative, and personal requirements necessary to progress to the next level and receive my Master's Degree in Communication and Culture.

Narrative

1. *every story needs an earthquake.*

FOUR BOMBASTIC FOOD CRITICS SITTING around a table at L'Étranger, flagship restaurant of notorious perfectionist Wolfgang Fuko, winner of four International Tournaments of Champions on Iron Chef (Original Version, Japan – Fuko's triumphant dishes, in chronological order: Lemon Salmon Tartare; Mesquite Grilled Avocado and Foie Gras Makizushi; Elk-fried Tofu Taquitos Parmesan; Potato and Frogs Legs Lasagna Chowder on amaranth toast).

The decor? Obsessive, naturally. Chef Fuko requires that every cubic centimetre of his space conform to exacting standards; any centimetre would be foolish to disobey him. Each of sixteen tables occupies a position equidistant from every other, those on the outermost layer the same distance from every wall, with every surface as high up off the ground as all others. Light scarcely allowed to enter the establishment, windows non-existent, illumination only from a white paraffin candle placed at table's centre. Diners may see their own dish clearly, the dishes of their table-mates vaguely. Nothing visible beyond that. Somewhere in outer darkness, a single musician plays, circulating along predetermined paths throughout the night. This evening: Sonatas and partitas for solo violin (Bach, *BWV 1001-1006*).

The menu:

Menu? One arrives at L'Étranger when one's reservation indicates and one eats what one is served. No orders, no special requests. No substitutions. Peanut allergies, dine elsewhere. Vegetarians, may God have mercy on your soul. Each day sees a different meal, never the same meal twice, but one can be assured that on any given night one will be served what is served to every other seated patron. This is the policy, the promise, of L'Étranger.

Only the reclusive Chef himself has ever borne witness to the kitchen, but if one were to see it, one would inevitably notice, at eye-level adjacent to the door to a sort of antechamber leading to the dining area, a rectangular absence where the restaurant's first review, printed in the city's most trusted broadsheet upon the event of L'Étranger's understatedly grand opening, has deliberately not been affixed to the wall. Not being there, the page serves as a constant reminder. Headline that day? **CHEF WOLFGANG FUKO: GENIUS, MADMAN.**

Having sufficiently sampled this evening's offering, Food Critics *A* through *D* (look at them, aren't they cute?) regale themselves with descriptions both typical and baffling.

Beginning at carbunkular cheeks and moving down to wiry whiskers' end only to start all over again, Critic A compulsively strokes his greying beard, opining: "This dish exemplifies shameless exploitation of the working class by the rapacious machinery of Global Capitalism. By attributing the privilege of Authorship solely to the "Chef," the establishment denies its own political economic ramifications, as if the meal were not the pure physical expression of victimization, slavery, and genocide; from the South American labourers whose suffering and sweat grew and harvested the ingredients to the dishwashers and busboys (all visible minorities) who are forcibly concealed from consumers and required to work for criminally low wages, the entire operation is designed to appeal to the *petite bourgeoisie* whose false consciousness compels them to consume (in the most literal sense) the products of exploitation in order to further the reactionary agenda of the Culture System. Also: there is no God."

Critic B adjusts his glasses and the checkered *keffiyeh* (clandestinely purchased at hipster emporium Urban Outfitters eighteen months previous; everyone shops there, but no one would be caught dead actually *shopping* there) around his pale European neck; he professes: "The dish is typical of the machinations of American/Zionist Imperialism; the Franco-Japanese motif symbolizes the self-assured

superiority (“Manifest Destiny”) of the Occident and its insistence on subsuming and co-opting any and all exploitable elements of competing cultures in order to fuel its ongoing dominance by appearing superficially to be inclusive of the Ethno-Cultural Other (the Chef as “Uncle Tom” figure). The French and Japanese themselves being former colonial powers “liberated” (that is to say, violently overthrown) by the American/Zionist Military-Industrial-Corporate Complex, ostensibly in defence of so-called “democratic values” but in truth simply further exerting hypernationalist and neoliberal ideology upon the most radical examples of resistance to Twentieth Century Economic/Racial (Anglo-Jewish) hegemony. Also: there is no God, but if there were it would be Allah and Mohammed would be His prophet.”

Critic C tilts back the brim of her hat, tightens her necktie and shrieks: “The utter and complete misogyny inherent in this meal should cause anyone with a semblance of humanity to want to vomit in outrage. The evacuation of femininity and phallocentricizing of domesticity runs rampant in excision of any vestige of the muliebral *vis-à-vis* the (male, of course) Chef, celebrated for preparation of food, masculinizing one of the only creative pursuits commonly permitted to females in society, essentially removing it from the sphere of occupations available to women who wish to establish economic and gender independence outside the boundaries of the deeply heterosexist public/private dichotomy asserted by the Patriarchy for all of recorded history, a form of crypto-rape, a sort of female castration. It makes me sick. Also: there is no God, but if there were She would be a Woman.”

Several seconds follow in which solely audible is the sound of Bach (at this point having reached the end of Partita No 3 in E Major) hovering in darkness somewhere beyond our four critics' table.

Critic D speaks: “This is a telephone smothered in mayonnaise. And there is no God.”

Suddenly: Earth quakes. Critics all die instantly.

ACHIEVING FAME UNDER THE PSEUDONYM “THE SINGER” he maintained this alias even after his retirement from the profession of *chanteur* to pursue a life devoted to enforcing equality of all (according to his own, some argued, fairly arbitrary definition) sentient beings by any means necessary, including, but not limited to: violence; non-violence; hunger strikes; pie-eating contests; vows of silence; benefit concerts; lobbing rocks at tanks; leaping out of the way at the last moment so that anyone standing behind him would be shot back at instead, then condemning military retaliation in “strongest possible terms”; demanding complete freedom of speech; enacting boycotts and campaigns of intimidation against speakers of whom he did not approve; dressing up as dual-purpose-cattle and attempting to traumatize children by implying that their milk-proffering parents are murderers and abusers; and whatever the opposite of that is; this major life change, this re-imagining or re-prioritizing, came in the wake of The Singer's discovery that he had a certain talent – a knack, really – for being persuasive; extremely, *suspiciously* persuasive, some would say *supernaturally persuasive*, though The Singer, of course, would not say this; he wouldn't ever say the word “supernatural” at all except derisively, usually accompanied by rolling of eyes and that quotation-marks gesture made by curling the index and middle fingers of both hands to indicate heavy sarcasm, because, no, he didn't attribute his ability to anything outside the physical world of natural, scientific laws, he personally did not claim to have any knowledge of the origin of his ability, expressing that he would leave that up to others to discover if they felt compelled to do so, and his only interest was using what he had (*not*, he would correct you, *what he had been given*, since that would imply conscious, intentional action by a *giver*, which was needlessly anthropomorphic not to mention hopelessly absurd – but simply *what he had*) to make the world a better place for all of its living inhabitants, and, oh, also it turned out that his talent for convincing people of things only functioned when delivered in song (no, seriously) so it

would not be completely accurate to describe his transition from professional singer to professional activist as a retirement exactly (even though that's how, admittedly, it has in fact just been described) but not completely *inaccurate* either: The Singer still sang, he gave musical press conferences and suchlike, but he was not singing for entertainment any longer, or for artistic edification, he now sang for the moral enlightenment of the masses, and okay, not one hundred percent of those who heard him would be turned to his side of an issue, but his success rate was far higher than mere chance would have been, and everyone knew it, which is why there were those who refused to listen to him out of principle, feeling that he was using some sort of (literal or figurative, depending on one's metaphysical preferences) demonic mind control and who wished to hold on to their own opinions which they, obviously, believed were true and who thought that The Singer's voice might steer them away from reality to become followers of his philosophy instead (which he, of course, also genuinely considered Correct and True), and certain audio-visual media outlets vowed that they would never broadcast The Singer's songs, only reading transcripts of them, or prose distillations after the fact, or simply ignoring them altogether, which many people preferred; and yet The Singer also had his share of True Believers who would have followed his lead no matter what, and a fair number of people felt that they were open-minded enough to give him the benefit of the doubt – these people frequently were convinced, of course, following an earful of The Singer's heartfelt pourings-out, and subsequently became True Believers, though some, a few, remained unpersuaded for whatever reason and a number of those tended to go on and join those opposed to the very concept of the man, sure, but slowly, very slowly, yet surely, very surely, the size of the group composing his opponents was shrinking. He had not decided to run for public office but practically everyone felt that was inevitable eventually.

KNOWN AS *AGENT K*, THE OLDEST MAN IN THE WORLD displays no typical symptoms expected of a person his age, beyond a certain (quite understandable) sort of sartorial paralysis. Remarkable! This past spring, Agent K celebrated his two-hundred and eighty-fifth birthday. Featuring blueberry cheesecake. Really pretty delicious, to hear tell. Asked about what most profound changes he's observed thanks to his extraordinary longevity, he relates the following:

In his youth he would travel daily to the centre of town where stood the architectural marvel known today officially as “Generic House of Worship.” Built centuries earlier than even Agent K himself, the aforementioned structure was simple yet elegant; its underframe in essence a three-story cube, its facade employed a distinct design style for each separate outer wall. Having taken so very long to construct – in part due to waxing and waning availability of funds and donations, in part to sporadic disruptions and physical damage to the site caused by

1. Flood;
2. Fire; and
3. Hurricane

– by the time one side of it was completed in full, public tastes had shifted, requiring re-imagination by draftspersons, engineers, sundry public officials, *et cetera*, such that at time of its official dedication one would scarcely have been able to tell that the place one had entered through one door was the same which one exited by another.

North face: in late Baroque/early Neo-Classical style, upright vertical columns, crowned by pediment, bays of sash windows.

East face: in Gothic style, ogival arches, groin vaults, flying buttresses between which walls opened up into enormous windows of prismatic, coloured stained glass.

South face: proto-Modernism, modular wood, glass, and iron, upon granite plinth, arranged as a grid along this entire side of the building.

West face: nostalgically in Ancient Near East style, all unevenly textured sandstone and light limestone masonry.

Nobody really remembered in which order the four sides were built, and naturally no two people could agree on which were archetypes of beauty and majesty and which hideously ill-conceived eyesores; all managed, though, to have an opinion. Nevertheless, a constant stream of faithful poured in and out via one entrance or another according to their aesthetic preference, boycotting those doors offending their sensibilities, only to meet within the sanctuary's reverberant interior, unified, open, all-inclusive.

A single feature, though, everyone seemed to concur, shone as an example of beautiful brilliance: in outer courtyard, a simple circular pool, full at all times with water still as eternity, deep enough to prevent vision penetrating its surface even under brightest day; accordingly crepuscular to a point such that its depth was inestimable. Water filled it to its lip, yet it had never been observed to overflow, even under the most voluminous downpour. A mystery no one has been sufficiently able to explain to this very day.

Here at pool's edge Agent K would perch himself every day to sip infusion of mint, watch passers-by, record thoughts and observations, both rational and empirical, internal and external alike. Citizens travelling to Generic House of Worship would always see him there, same time-same place, looking, thinking, writing. All of these people knew him by sight if not by name, and he gained a reputation; so regular and precise in his appearance and departure from the spot that it was widely acknowledged one could set one's clock by him, and not an insignificant number in fact literally did; here was Agent K

first discovered and recruited by those forces who would dub him with the designation under which he was to become known.

All this is to say: most profound changes observed by Agent K across these decades and centuries? Two would come immediately to his mind.

First, nobody goes to Generic House of Worship anymore and its primary function today is as a venue for extremely loud rock concerts (a musical style not at all to his liking), and

Second, all clocks are now automatically calibrated by satellite, rendering him redundant at best as a means of timekeeping. He would not admit to it having been the *conscious* reason for his discontinuation of that daily routine some number of years ago, but it was something about which he had wondered once or twice.

The resulting fame of his ostensibly-secret-but-totally-not-actually-secret work for the government brought Agent K into frequent conflict with The Singer (yes, *that* The Singer!); conflict mostly ideological and fought through the media, but in one case coming physically to blows during a stand-off between government forces (in the employ of which Agent K had been for several decades at that point) and civilian protesters turned violent, over some much-more-complicated-than-it-was-ever-explained-as-being issue of animal rights versus corporate progress. The two opponents also teamed up once to battle a robot gone mad rampaging through the city. It was pretty cool, they made a movie of it. They remained in touch occasionally after that, though they had little affection and practically no respect for one another. Agent K considered The Singer to be an arrogant and ungrateful child, with insufficient life experience to justify the certainty he professed about his convictions. To The Singer, Agent K was a superstitious, reactionary old man, a sellout and tool of The System, and a weirdo to boot – in contrast to The Singer's belief that his power of persuasion was attributable to nothing in particular, Agent K vehemently held that that *his* talents (not mentioned here before, but Agent K's thing is that he tends to make extremely good choices: things he does usually – not always, but very

frequently – end up turning out well, which is the reason that the government recruited him all those years ago) are a gift from a Higher Power. He thus holds that his incredible longevity is a result of positive decisions regarding personal health and lifestyle. This includes his lifelong celibacy, which The Singer never likes to miss an opportunity to mock, on the basis that it's utterly ridiculous, counterfactual, and no fun. This also includes Agent K's diet, which admits fish three to four times a week, and beef, chicken, or lamb once a week, which The Singer finds morally appalling, not to mention nutritionally suspect.

That said, The Singer and Agent K maintain a polite, if chilly, semi-professional relationship, which is the reason they're having dinner together tonight at world-famous eatery L'Étranger. Due to the place's nigh-lightless decor, the two of them remain oblivious to the identities of the diners around them. Though they couldn't possibly know it, one nearby table hosts four famous food critics. Seated at another, eating alone, taking full advantage of the anonymity offered by invisibility, celebrating the completion of the first hand-inscribed draft of her debut novel, none other than Maggie Write.

AUTHOR, DOCTOR OF FINE ARTS MAGGIE WRITE (BORN MARGARET

FALLS REICHENBACH a mere twenty-six years ago but changed for professional reasons as well as to put further distance between her and her already-quite-physically-distant father from whom she inherited the surname) would surely have found success either way, but the fact of her photogenicity and general physical attractiveness certainly did nothing to hurt her chances. Possessed of a pile of fusilli-hair so dark it was often mistaken for black (on the brightest days a deep unsettling red like long-dry blood revealed in it), large Mediterranean blue eyes (almost imperceptibly too far apart), broad lips, an ounce of baby fat clinging to each cheek, making for quite inviting photos on inside back covers or full-colour front-pages of alternative arts weeklies.

She'd be embarrassed and horrified by this description, of course, and frequently was (i.e., horrified and embarrassed) since practically all reviews of her work and interviews in the media ended up prefaced with these, to her, irrelevant, superficial things that had no bearing whatsoever on the quality of her writing. If it wouldn't have simply exaggerated the issue and played right into the hands of those illiterates calling themselves journalists and writing presumably mainly for other illiterates, she would have emphasized that in addition to the aforementioned characteristics, she also had teeth that were uneven, that the distance between her eyes was only alluring and exotic when viewed from certain very specific angles, she was barely a quarter-of-an-inch above five feet tall (including her hair) and had difficulty with fluctuating weight as a side effect of the medication she took for clinical depression, which had also almost totally extinguished her libido, rendering her virtually asexual since their prescription to her as a teenager, and that she was particularly displeased with the length of her nose when viewed in profile. She never permitted the existence of official photos displaying her body below the clavicle. Just easier that way, especially when her weight was up, which seemed to her a monthly recurrence, regardless of diet.

Maggie's talents initially came to public awareness upon printing of her first piece in a peer-reviewed university literary journal: an untitled experimental epic poem consisting solely of a single word surrounded by dozens of blank pages (not to be reproduced here so as not to infringe on her intellectual property rights but here's a hint: it has eight letters, three syllables). Subsequently she produced short stories that were regularly printed and reprinted in serious magazines across the continent, eventually collected in a nice-sized trade paperback edition by *A Major Press* in the final year of her Doctorate in Creative Writing. Almost universally praised, it became an unprecedented bestseller (who the hell even reads short stories anyway?) and suddenly:

Maggie Write: Literary Superhero.

The back cover featured a full-colour glamour shot of the author. She'd objected at first but was

overruled by her publisher, who pointed to an obscure clause in her contract which she, unagented, had overlooked.

“Is it true,” asked one interviewer, “that you hand-write all your first drafts before typing them up?”

“Yes,” she replied.

Overnight, the grey moleskine notebook she carried on her at all times became the world's most intriguing physical object, ranked on *www.apopularwebsite.com* (notorious for its absurd yet somehow still culturally relevant articles designed at least partly to incite outrage in humourless and/or elitist visitors) as #1 out of the Top Ten, surpassing the wreckage of the Area 51 incident and the Ark of the Covenant. Its estimated value in dollars was in the hundreds of millions, making it costlier than plutonium, though still significantly cheaper than antimatter. But *rarer* than antimatter. Absolutely unique in the universe, and so in a very real sense priceless. The rumour, known to be true only by Maggie herself, was that she had been working on her first – wildly anticipated and widely speculated-upon – novel. In fact she had just put the final period at the end of the last sentence of the first draft this very evening, at which point we join her.

2. *de/position.*

[REDACTED] ?

My birth name is [REDACTED]. But I am most well known and currently operate under the pseudonym Agent K.

The Singer, though legally [REDACTED] is what's on my driver's license, haven't got it on me right now though, must have biked here.

[REDACTED].

Of course. I and a colleague of mine, The Singer. I assume you're familiar with him, he is fairly well-known. We were having dinner together. It had been quite a while since we had last seen each other. Besides in the media, of course. I don't recall which of us proposed the meeting. Probably I did, since I think that he tends to dislike me more than I dislike him. He had written an article in one of the local newspapers that I happened to read, on the subject of the role

Having dinner at L'Étranger with Agent K. He was going on about something, he just goes on and on about things, you know, some ridiculous point on metaphysics, you know, the way he does, as if there is anything *beyond* physics. Myself, trying to figure out what could actually be eaten from the meal since, you know, vegan and all. No meat, no animal products of any kind. Love the place, love the restaurant – Chef Fuko's a personal friend – but, you know, just can't tolerate any

of the state and the individual in international politics. Disagreeing with him on many points, in fact rejecting his entire premise on the grounds that it was, not to put too fine a point on it, internally inconsistent, I wrote a rebuttal, which was subsequently printed the following week. He replied in the form of a letter to the editor. I decided to take our disagreement out of the public sphere, so I sent him an email, to which he responded in kind. I then called him on the phone. I find written correspondence difficult, sometimes, inferior to face-to-face communication. At any rate, we argued for a while, then agreed to continue our discussion over dinner. We arranged to meet at L'Étranger. It is a very well-respected establishment, but I tend to find it excessively...what is the word...pretentious, I suppose. The Chef, I hear, has a touch of the mental illness, poor man. I do not begrudge him his success, it is simply not to my taste. The Singer has a particular affinity for the place, though, despite the fact that he can rarely eat the meals they prepare there. He is vegan, you see. animal products, the cruelty, you know. It's a tough compromise. Love the decor and everything, and when he wants to Wolfgang can create an almond quick-bread that's just astonishing, but you know how difficult geniuses can be. And but so then the building started to shake, just really shake and rock. Didn't know what to think at first, you know, maybe the gas stove in the kitchen had exploded or something, couldn't imagine that this was actually an earthquake, you know, like a geological event. Never had a recorded earthquake in this part of the country, ever; hurricanes, yes; flood, yes; and the great fire of oh-four, of course, but earthquakes just, you know, unprecedented. It seems to have totally defied the Gutenberg-Richter Law for magnitude-to-frequency ratio of seismic activity. We, you know, obviously must be missing some critical data, well, because the subsequent investigation didn't find any evidence of...look, checked out the research on the subject, we're not situated on a fault line, the very localized area of the quake makes an intraplate event very unlikely,

But I suppose it is a matter of pride or status or some such thing. It obviously cannot be that he goes there “to be seen,” as the saying goes, because it is literally impossible to see anyone there. There was once a vegan meal served to him there, he assures me. He claims that he persuaded the Chef to make an exception in his case, but I suspect that it was, if true, just a coincidence. Well, I don't believe in coincidence, in fact, so perhaps I should say it was fortuitous but not particularly a kindness on the Chef's part, if you see what I mean.

But I digress. I have a habit of doing that, I'm afraid. Please do interrupt me if I stray too far off the topic at hand. I am here for...a reason...after all.

At any rate, that is when the earthquake struck. The floor cracked apart beneath our feet and the ceiling cleaved in two. An enormous piece of stone or masonry fell right down onto a table near ours. Four people were crushed instantly under it.

although that seems like it must be the most probable scenario at this point, obviously we're not in a volcanic region. Raised the idea with the authorities later on that it could have been induced seismicity, that is, a manmade catastrophe, but besides the fact that this far outstripped the largest ever manmade earthquakes in history, they've assured that there was nothing going on anywhere in the city that could have caused something like this, no dams in the area, no skyscrapers being constructed, no mines or fuel extraction facilities. It's very strange. Not a geologist, of course, my doctorate is in social studies but...anyway, everything started shaking, violently, abruptly, the candle rolled right off the table and went out, so everything went completely dark instead of just *almost* completely dark, but that was only for a few seconds because then the roof split open, more or less just tore right apart in the middle like paper. Full moon that night, and lights from the city spilled inside too, so there was suddenly enough light to give us a fairly good view of the restaurant and what was going on.

Nothing could have been done to save them.

<Here Agent K pauses; sighs deeply, mournfully>

It turned out later that, fortunately, the majority of the restaurant's patrons and staff managed to escape quickly. Those near the walls or the exits just ran. The chef and the workers left through the back door in the kitchen. But there was a young lady at a table close to ours, near the centre of the dining room, who seemed to be trapped – as we were. We could see now, since the roof had cracked open and light was coming in, fracturing the darkness.

There was another quake, then. An aftershock, perhaps. At any rate, a pillar of stone or solidified earth shot up from the ground. A metre thick, as long as the entire building and tall enough to reach the crack where the roof had been. It almost extended all the way to our table, but not quite. The Singer and I were still safe. The woman at the next table, though, was clearly not. She had

Noticed immediately that the author Maggie Write was at a nearby table, which, you know, was exciting. Been an admirer of hers and her work for several years now. Met her once at a party thrown by her publisher – doubt she'd remember if you asked her, though; she was shaken by the – well, no pun intended – she'd been visibly traumatized by the earthquake, but she didn't look hurt. My eyes were drawn, then, to the notebook still lying on the table beside her, knew at once that it was her famous notebook, where she was writing her novel. Fan of hers, you know, anticipating this new book for quite a while now, you know. Just then, everything started shaking all over again, maybe even worse than the first time, chunk of rock broke through the floor and basically cleaved the place in two, like a wall, like a separation barrier between the two halves of the restaurant, practically. Appeared directly under Maggie's table. Destroyed the table and threw Maggie down on one side of the rock. The notebook had been thrown to the other side, fires starting to break out all over the restaurant,

been knocked down, and I could not tell if she was conscious. The light was still dim, obviously. It was nighttime, after all. I was afraid the whole building could collapse at any moment, so I ran to her and bent down to pick her up. The front entrance was inaccessible due to fire.

probably from the electrical wiring or possibly the gas stove, but either way, it was obvious that there wasn't going to be time to rescue both of them, it was Maggie or the notebook. Had to run, grab the book, and then try to get out of there with it as fast as possible, you know, it was vital at that moment

[REDACTED]?

Not much of a decision, really. I felt any decent person would have done the same. At any rate, it turned out that she was conscious, though understandably stunned. She had been knocked down, but didn't appear to be injured, merely in shock. I explained the situation to her, as quickly as I could, helping her to her feet. The Singer I trusted would be capable of taking care of himself, which, it turns out, he was. He's by no means an incompetent man, but he has his axioms, his assumptions, and he stays to them. They're wrong, of course. But it is admirable, in a way.

Excuse me, it would be appreciated if you wouldn't interrupt. It's quite rude to interrupt when another person is speaking, you know, you haven't been interrupted by me, the same sort of respect is expected in return. Frankly what is even going on here is a bit unclear, as a matter of fact, and it's beginning to occur to to wonder just now what gives you the authority, what gives you the right, to bring a person here, wherever this place even is, subject one to this, this, interrogation, who are you, who do you think you are. Those aren't even words you're saying, not even comprehensible as

[REDACTED].

Another quick decision had to be made, as there And but so the notebook was laying there.

was no obvious escape route, yet we clearly could not simply stay there and hope for the best. I had to take a moment to centre myself, as it were, compose my thoughts, and then choose one or the other path to take. As I mentioned, a piece of the ceiling had fallen and divided the building. There was fire behind us. One of these two paths could have led us out. But of course, perhaps both of them could have led us out. Through the kitchen, or a hole or crack that had opened up in the wall. Or both could have been dead ends. There was simply no way to know, but of course I could only take one path and not both of them. It's true that I've been blessed with a tendency to make the right decisions, but this isn't the case one hundred percent of the time.

I chose, more or less at random, in effect a coin flip, the right hand path.

Difficult to see anything with all the smoke, et cetera, but what was visible was a sign on the floor. An actual sign, an EXIT sign. It must have fallen from a door somewhere. Although thinking about it now, Wolfgang would never have had an illuminated exit sign in his establishment, it would have utterly ruined the ambiance, you know, it would have lit the place up like a...well, like an EXIT sign. And certainly no such sign was apparent anywhere at all during the meal, which would seem to support this as well. That may have contravened some safety ordinances or bylaws or some such thing, but Wolfgang would not have cared, and visible exits wouldn't have saved those critics who got crushed, and everyone else managed to get out safely. But anyway, there was an EXIT sign on the ground, and it was even lit up, you know, which also seems strange in retrospect. What could have been powering it?

[REDACTED]

Yes.

Well, who knows, really. Suppose they had to have

Ms Write and I made our way through the restaurant, the outer brick wall of the building on to our right and the piece of fallen stone to our left. Fire behind us. Water below us, from burst pipes or some such thing. Night sky visible through the smoke above us.

To our great fortune, the path did lead us to a door. This opened into a small room, which itself opened to the kitchen, through which we escaped by the back exit. Neither Ms Write nor myself were seriously injured, for which I am of course grateful.

But then I noticed something rather strange. As we entered the kitchen from the vestibule area, I saw something. *Someone*. Except...this is difficult to describe. I've no doubt it was a person, but he – or she – seemed to be sort of *glowing*. At the time I only caught a glimpse, only for a second out of the corner of my eye, but I'm sure that I saw someone running out the back door just ahead of us, and

been. Wasn't in much of an analytical mood at the time, trying to get out of the place with my life and this book intact, after all. This EXIT sign was illuminated and visible through the smoke and the water and all of that, you know, and it seemed as reasonable a course of action as any to follow that path rather than the other, as there was no way to differentiate between the two, so, you know, bit of a coin flip sort of scenario.

Dashed straight through, a bit like running the gauntlet, as a matter of fact. Have a rather good lung capacity, you know, from voice training and such, which is surprisingly beneficial for athletics and health in general, you know, which was a happy little discovery. Agent K and Maggie were

nowhere to be seen, though it turned out they managed to escape through the kitchen, but this path just led outside via a massive triangular crack in the outside wall that must have ruptured, separated, during the quake. Ambulances, fire trucks and such had not yet arrived, though sirens could be heard in the distance and approaching, but, you know, no injuries to my own person.

this person was...not much of a person at all, in a way. It more resembled the man you see pictured on the WALK signal when it's safe to cross the street. Almost an abstraction of a man, and shining, a bright green-white light radiating from the figure's body. I supposed then it could have been Chef Fuko, and maybe the fluorescent lights of the kitchen were reflecting off his attire in a peculiar way. But I...I just don't think so. I must admit, the whole scene rather confused me, as I'm sure you must understand. Now that I've answered your questions, I wonder if I might ask one of my own.

Decided the best course of action under the circumstances was to head home, draw a nice relaxing bath, and head to bed, take care of the inevitable complicated matters the following morning. Survivors and casualties would have been sorted out by then, and all that sort of thing, et cetera. The notebook, of course, Maggie's notebook, her novel, was returned to her as well, as soon as could be reasonably expected.

Excellent book, by the way. Stunning. Fantastic sort of thing to read in the tub, you know. Couldn't possibly recommend it too highly. Guaranteed to make literary history. Can't wait until it's published.

What is this place? And who are you?

3. *excerpt from early in Maggie Write's asphyxiatingly anticipated debut novel, Kindling (A Major Press 20XX).*

a>

-Fifteen minutes. Okay.

Coffees in hand, they scrape wooden chairs across tile floor and sit.

-What did you get? Name tag still pinned to her shirt says: BELLA.

-Uh, *Ristretto Grande Peppermint Soy Light Cinnamon Powder Light Foam Matcha Flavoured Latte*. Name tag pinned to her shirt says: PRITI.

-Wow. I don't even know what that is.

-Me neither. What did you get?

-*Add Shot Grande Vanilla Nonfat Double Blended No Whip Caffè Vanilla Frappucino®.*

-Ha! And you were making fun of *my* drink order.

-I wasn't making fun of it. It just confused me, that's all. And anyway, I know exactly what my drink means.

-Oh yeah?

-Sure. Frappunico®, it's like coffee and milk, non-fat milk in this case, blended with ice. Double-blended means they blend it twice, I guess. Size Grande, that's like medium. One extra shot of espresso. Vanilla syrup. They put whipped cream on it, unless you ask them not to.

-Impressive. How much did that cost?

-Twenty-thousand and five dollars and eighty-nine cents. If you include my university tuition. What

I want to know is how you ordered that drink without knowing what it is.

-I just kind of take whatever they suggest.

-Of course. That's how they get ya. That must have cost you like eight bucks.

-Yeah, so I better try to enjoy it because the next hour of work after this break is over is going to pay for it. So with all your arcane drink knowledge why don't you know what my drink means?

-I only care what *my* drink means. I never bothered to learn about, like, *Ristretto Matcha* or whatever. Anyway. Do you have a registered card? It's cheaper.

-No. What do you mean?

-You get a card and you just sign up on the website.

-What good is it?

-You put money on the card so it's like a prepaid debit card and you just pay for drinks with that, you don't have to worry about rooting through your purse for change and stuff. You get a free refill of regular coffee, but only if you stay in the store while you drink it. You get free extras like soy powder or syrup shots, which is where you'd save a little money, Miss Peppermint Soy. You also get two hours of free wireless Internet per day. And you get a free one-year membership to the Illuminati.

-That's pretty good.

-Oh, and you get a free drink on your birthday!

-Ooh! Okay, sold. Boy, you should get a job *here*.

-But then I'd miss out on the exciting world of...whatever the hell it is we do all day.

-This is true. Thirteen minutes, by the way.

-Fantastic. Oh, and plus now there's an app you can download so you can pay for your drinks just by, like, shaking your phone at the barista's head or whatever.

-For real? What kind of phone do you need for that?

-The kind that can use apps, I guess. An iPhone? I don't have one. Maybe a Blackberry. I don't have

one of those either.

-I want to get a new phone, actually. And a new plan. The one I've got now is shit. What do you have?

-Oh, uh, here.

Produces a cellular phone from her purse. It's shiny. The phone, not the purse. The purse is Burgundy Matte.

-What carrier do you have? Priti asks.

-Verisimilitude Mobile. It's pretty good, actually.

-Do you have a plan, or...?

-There's a monthly plan I'm on, but no contract. They have contracts too, two or three years or whatever, and you can get a free phone with those, but I just bought my phone and I pay month by month.

-How much?

-Thirty bucks for two hundred minutes per month, and then plus five bucks for a hundred outgoing text messages. I used to pay ten bucks for twenty *five* hundred outgoing texts per month, but since that thing with whatshisname didn't work out I don't text that much anymore. Incoming text messages are free. Free call display and call waiting and voicemail, also.

-That's awesome. I should totally get on that plan.

-Oh, the plan doesn't actually exist anymore. They don't offer it now. Sorry. I was just kind of grandfathered in to it.

-Oh, you are such a cocktease.

-Sorry. They have other good plans too, though.

-Yeah, two hundred minutes wouldn't be enough for me anyway. I talk way more than that per month. Are there free evenings and weekends, or...?

-No, just two hundred anytime minutes. They don't roll over. But like I said, the other plans are different. It's pretty customizable, actually.

-I'll check it out!

-Yeah, do! If you decide to go with them, let me know first. I'll get you an activation code, and if you sign up then I get, like, a credit for ten dollars or something. Oh, and I think you can get like a fifty dollar credit if you activate a new phone online this month.

-Cool.

-What plan do you have now?

-Oh God. It's fifty dollars a month for a thousand minutes, but text messages are all extra, like thirty-five cents each, and I get unlimited evening and weekend calling, but it only starts at nine PM. Call waiting and call display are free, but I have to pay for voicemail...I don't even remember how much. It sucks because I *always* end up going way over my minutes, plus texts, and I get my bill at the end of the month and I basically just freak out and promise to get a new plan but I never do. Usually get my period at the same time as the phone bill, which doesn't help either. But my contract is about to expire. So your thing sounds pretty good. I suck at math, though, so maybe it isn't even.

-So wait, you get a thousand minutes a month, *plus* free evenings and weekends, and you *still* go over?

-Yeah, I know. It's completely stupid.

-Well, but, just...who do you *talk to* so much?

-Oh, uh, my boyfriend mostly.

-But, *a thousand minutes a month*? That's like...seventeen hours almost.

-Seventeen hours? Only? That's like, I probably use that up in like two days.

-That's nuts. If I didn't have to talk to customers at work, it would literally take me an entire month to use up seventeen hours of talking time just face-to-face.

-Speaking of which. Ten minutes left.

-Glorious. How's your coffee, by the way?

-It's good. How's yours?

-It's fine.

-I might get one of those iPhones, actually. They're pretty cool.

-Yeah. Wow, you know, we get fifteen minutes break from work and we spend the whole time talking about products. That's kind of sad.

-This is true. We should probably be talking about, like, high heels and who we're sleeping with and stuff.

-Ha. Yeah.

-Are you sleeping with anyone?

-No.

-Oh.

-*Oh my Dear Lord in heaven.*

-What is it? I'm sorry I asked about –

-No, it's not that. I just realized that if I'm paying thirty dollars a month for two hundred minutes, that's fifteen cents per minute.

-Okay.

-So that's nine hundred cents per hour. Plus taxes, plus averaging out what I paid for the phone in the first place. Not even including texts. Which adds up to *more than I make from working*. I'm literally buying time from one corporation for more money than I sell my own time to a different corporation for. What the hell?

-Wow. Yeah. That's pretty depressing, isn't it?

-Um. Yeah.

-Yeah. Well. Uh, eight minutes left.

-Outstanding.

b>

Work over, Bella and Priti exit through the back, lock up. Aim themselves at the subway. It's dark out; when they started today, it was light. This is always unsettling. The subway station is close, just across the street. The light is red, that little red hand holds them back. No cars. But they wait anyway.

They wait.

They wait.

Green. That little silhouette of a man lights up, flashes at them, neckless, strident. Bella stares at it, across the empty road. The man blinks. Disappears then appears again. Then disappears. Walk. Now it is safe. Around the head of Bella Kiss, silence swirls, cyclonic.

Suddenly: Earth quakes.

But wait: no. Not Earth. Bella. Bella's brain. Bella's brain quakes.

-Bella? Are you okay? What's wrong?

Bella's lungs stop, but her heart beats like a brute. Her skin freezes, her every pore squeezes out a drop of ice cold sweat. She tastes metal.

Then a shock of electricity runs right through her body, not like being struck by lightning but like stepping on a live wire on a beach in bare feet. Muscles tense, all of them, Bella's arms curling in, nothing she can do to stop them, she almost smacks herself in the face with both hands. Jaw snaps shut like a bear trap, she's afraid she's broken her teeth. Shoulders up at her ears, her head shakes back and forth, left right left right as if with desperate disagreement, no no no no no no no no.

Everything relaxes, then. But constricts again. Relaxes. Constricts. Relaxes. Constricts.

Bella drops, quaking.

[Later the doctor will tell her: it's interesting that you likened the seizure to an earthquake at first, that you thought it was the ground shaking before realizing that it was you. Because not only is an epileptic seizure mathematically identical to an earthquake, but even the word that immediately precedes “seize” in the dictionary happens to be, in fact, “seismology.” In *my* dictionary, at least. Your mileage may vary. The two are not even etymologically related, the one deriving from the ancient Greek *seismos*, meaning earthquake, and the other from the Medieval Latin *sacīre*, meaning to lay claim to or appropriate. Isn't that interesting. Bella will admit that it is.]

Sideways on the sidewalk, terrified and wet, Bella's eyes roll up. Somewhere out there, Priti is attending to her, calling 911 with one of those free evening minutes. What Bella sees is that flashing, walking man on the other side of the street, growing, expanding out of his signal's little enclosure until he is the size of a person. He sets his feet down on the ground and he, the WALK signal itself, traverses the street. He comes to Bella for once, instead of *vice versa*. He looks both ways.

He talks to her.

-Get up.

-I can't, Bella says. But doesn't really says. Her mouth won't do what she wants it to. Bella is a little bit out of her body right now. Just a little bit. But enough. She can see her own head.

-Yes you can.

-I really can't move.

-You can move. You are okay. You will be fine. You aren't alone. Bella. Believe me. You are not alone.

[Just like an earthquake, the doctor will tell her, a seizure is a slow accumulation of energy. It builds up, little by little, secretly, below notice. Until finally it all lets go and everything comes out at once. Systems Theory calls it a “relaxation event.” That's funny, Bella will say. Because it was really not

actually very relaxing at all.]

Bella ceases to seize. She commences to breathe. She fades to black.

4. *in which an enormous wooden robot falls out of the sky.*

AT A DISTANCE APPROXIMATELY HALFWAY BETWEEN L'Étranger restaurant's former site (current site of destruction and regret; future site of new, improved L'Étranger restaurant once insurance pays out, with a second-floor lounge for experimental *aperitifs* and various bewildering designer spirituous beverages) and Generic House of Worship (architecturally intact): Agent K's personal residence, nestled in Monarch Park, a neighbourhood until recently dismissed as a hopeless slum. Agent K had privately, quietly petitioned municipal powers to transform it altogether, initiating its reincarnation into a mixed-use community including subsidized social housing for low-income families plus the sort of trendy and expensive condominiums sprouting up everywhere these days like designer dandelions. This accomplished, Agent K felt compelled to purchase a unit there, though unaccustomed to living significantly above-ground and *sans* lawn. Nevertheless, Monarch Park's successful rehabilitation pleased him; besides, taking the stairs up and down each day was healthy, and his broad balcony proved more than sufficient for the perennials he used to augment the view out his window.

A view that Agent K, The Singer, and Maggie Write admire as they now sit around Agent K's wood-finish ovoid coffee table on tasteful bamboo chairs, drinking tea, sharing lemon-poppy seed bundt cake (vegan, for The Singer's convenience), and discussing recent events of common concern.

“*Peafowl?*” Agent K does not even attempt to conceal his surprise. “Why would you want to give up

writing to raise *peafowl*?”

Maggie Write sips her tea, sets cup back down on tabletop, shrugs.

“I like peafowl.”

“And you don't like writing?”

“I like writing too. But it's hard. It's a lot of pressure. A lot of, like, responsibility. It takes a lot out of me. I have to kind of...go to some dark places to write. If you know what I mean.”

“Raising peafowl would be an excellent career alternative,” The Singer says, “lovely creatures, you'd need a great deal of space for them, of course, you know, to run around and so on and so forth.”

“I thought it would be a nice literary substitute for actual writing. It's got a strong precedent. But I'd treat them nicely. I'll probably be moving into a bigger place anyway,” Maggie says, then wishes she could unsay.

“With the advance and inevitable royalties from your forthcoming – and brilliant, one might add, incandescent even – novel, and most likely film option for – ”

“Oh, I won't be selling any film option,” Maggie says, cutting The Singer off mid-sentence; often necessary if one wishes to get any words of one's own in, as she's learned. Money talk is one of those things that makes her uncomfortable. “That thing is probably unfilmable, and definitely unfilmable as anything *good*. It's pretty much mostly about concealment, and movies are all show show show. But yeah, I should be able to get a nice place outside the city with, like, grass and whatever.” She stares morosely at Agent K's potted Pelargonium out there visibly suppressing a sigh. Maggie, not the flowers.

“Are you all right?” asks Agent K.

“I'm fine. It's okay. Bit of post-partum depression kind of thing, from finishing the novel, I guess. Just a little shaky today. Sorry.” She sips her tea some more. Peppermint. A bit weird for her, sitting here with these two old white guys – or one old white guy and one really really *really* old white guy –

having tea and talking about, well, *her*. In a way she's reminded of her family. Maybe that's the weird part. The Singer, with his snowy pate and circuitous sentence structure, is a little like Maggie's uncle, her mum's brother. Agent K, with his silly fluffy beard and seemingly constant need for reassurances on your physical and psychological health, makes Maggie think of her late grandfather. She looks as a warm Monarch butterfly (after prevalence of which Monarch Park was named so many decades ago, and not, as has frequently yet spuriously been contended, for some unremembered sovereign) sets down on one of Agent K's ianthine blossoms out there on the balcony, then watches it startle and depart again at the arrival of a striking Red Admiral.

"No need to apologize," Agent K says, "I'm just concerned that –"

"You may well be a bit *shaky*, one might imagine, given what you've been through of late – what we've all been through – not to mention the very, you know, *seismological* subject matter of the work of literature in question," says The Singer.

"It is a striking coincidence," says Agent K. He hadn't read the manuscript personally, but had got the general gist of it from this afternoon's conversation. "That you wrote a novel with a very strong earthquake motif, and then were caught in the middle of a mysterious earthquake yourself."

"It is pretty weird," Maggie admits.

"Strange things happen," says The Singer.

"The earthquake is supposed to be, like, a metaphor," Maggie for some reason says.

"I think that it is more than a bit unusual...even synchronistic," says Agent K. The Singer snorts. Agent K continues, "and the character's hallucination of the man on the traffic signal coming to life seems to coincide also with something I thought I saw at the restaurant that day as well. It...well, it gives me pause."

"What, you think they're connected somehow?" Maggie says. "How's that possible?"

"Quite *impossible*," The Singer says.

Professes Agent K: “Nothing is impossible. In my experience. And my experience is rather extensive. And everything, as far as I have been able to determine, is connected.”

“Whatever *that* is supposed to mean,” The Singer says.

“Yeah, I'm not really sure what you're trying to imply either,” Maggie says.

“What I mean to say is that, well – ” Agent K begins, but is interrupted by a rumbling from outside, a tactile and auditory sensation all three of them find sickeningly familiar.

Suddenly: Earth quakes.

They three look at each other with terror and disbelief before running to the balcony to see what's going on. Fleeing *toward* a balcony in the midst of an earthquake? Generally not the wisest idea. Fortunately, however, this? No simple earthquake. *Unfortunately* though, the cause of these tremors? Arrival on the planet of an enormous wooden robot falling out of the sky.

Probably you'd figured that out already.

With no discernible means of propulsion and no apparent retrorockets to retard its descent it just drops at the speed of gravity as if someone *threw it* at us from space, like an angry kid would a Nintendo® controller. Tall and wide as a building, this thing. Roughly human-shaped, yet seemingly *carved*, as if from the most ancient and majestic tree and with most exquisite tools and care and patience, its skin brown lacquered bark, fire in the twin quadrate windows of its eyes. When it crashes to earth, square in the centre of the four-way intersection visible from Agent K's window, concrete cracks under its solid orthogonal feet like dried mud, dust and sand burst up in plumes and gusts as if trying to escape into the pink hot safety of bystanders' lungs. Car alarms and people's screams and dogs barking and an approaching fire engine's panicked whine.

Maggie Write says: “What in the *holy fuck* is *that*?”

Agent K gently chides: “Language.”

The Singer says: “Not the same as that other robot, that one time.”

Agent K: “No, not at all. This is clearly extraterrestrial, and looks like...wood. But definitely artificial. Constructed.”

The Singer: “One would imagine so.”

Maggie Write: “This is ridiculous.”

Agent K: “Agreed. All right, let's go.”

Two old white guys take off. For the front door, to the staircase. One young lady, no coward herself, follows, choosing not to overtake her elders purely out of politeness.

AN UNHURRIED STEP; left foot leaves a huge deep rectangular imprint. Cylinder of a head rotates right maybe eighty-eight degrees, squeaks like a trap door. Fire lazily erupting from its eyes sets adjacent building aflame. Another step, just as slow. Right foot rises, moves forward, sets down, breaks the ground. Four-story head turns left this time, hollow sockets flare, smoke, affright. Again. Repeats. Again again again.

All the usual King Kong-type monster-attack tactics already in action when Agent K and The Singer and Maggie Write appear, police and military sorts congregating around, ineffectual F-16s *et al.* Fire fighters extinguishing things, or attempting to.

Agent K assesses.

“All right. Clearly it's impenetrable from outside. The aircraft are too big to enter through its eyes, and I doubt that commandos rappelling in would be a very wise move, considering all that fire. The thing itself seems to be fire-proof, obviously, even though it's made of wood. Fascinating. But look. There. Along the sides of its legs.”

The Singer and Maggie look where Agent K is pointing, and see what he sees: its tree-trunk legs are

adorned with what appear to be pegs or hand-holds all up their length, terminating only where its torso begins.”

“You're saying,” The Singer says, “that there must be some kind of entry hatch or access panels there on the sides?”

“Correct.”

“Wait, so you're saying,” Maggie Write says, “that you expect us to *climb up there* and *go inside* that thing?”

“Affirmative.”

“That's crazy,” Maggie says. “Are you crazy?”

“I am not,” Agent K says. “I have almost complete confidence that we will be able to enter the creature and disable it from within. I'm nearly positive. Ninety percent.”

“We have experience with this sort of thing, Maggie,” says The Singer, seeping authority. “We would, however, and Agent K will in all likelihood agree with this, benefit from your assistance, though one might take issue with Agent K's use of the word 'creature' to define it, since...”

The Singer goes on, but Maggie Write stops listening. She thinks about writing novels. She thinks about raising peafowl. She looks up at the inferno-eyes of a colossal ligneous alien automaton laying careless waste to her hometown. She sighs chasmally.

“Fine, whatever.”

“Excellent,” says Agent K.

The Singer says, “Going to commandeer one of those fire trucks and bring it back here.”

And Agent K says, “Precisely. Maggie, please come with me.”

Maggie, out of her element but willing to indulge this adventurous urge, complies.

A MILITARY MAN, GREY MUSTACHE, CAMO HAT, clearly in charge here. Agent K goes up like he knows him.

“Colonel,” Agent K greets him, pronouncing it (correctly) as “kernel,” and the linguistics of which having always bugged Maggie she makes a mental note to look it up later (culprit will turn out to be *phonetic dissimulation*, wouldn't you know).

The Colonel turns and, seeing Agent K, his expression rises into a slightly less cartoonish grimace.

“Agent K,” he says. “Thank fuck you're here.”

“Language, Colonel,” says Agent K, and Maggie doesn't feel quite so condescended to anymore as she had. “This is my associate, Maggie Write.” Maggie raises her eyebrows and tightens her lips in salutation.

“Pleased to meet you,” the Colonel says. “Any idea what the shit we've got on our hands here, Agent?” Utterly disregarding Agent K's obvious distaste for profanity. “Our weaponry's having no effect on the wooden bastard, and it's putting more holes in this city than a goddamn golf course.”

What impresses Maggie is that a golf course only has at best eighteen holes so the simile at first fails particularly to astonish, but looking back at the robot's trodden path and quickly counting craters, it appears to have taken *exactly* eighteen steps since its initial landing. She admires that kind of attention to detail.

“My first thought was that it was some sort of extraterrestrial construct,” Agent K says, “but looking closer now I'm not convinced that it isn't, in fact, a naturally occurring life form in its own right. It doesn't seem to be *actively* attempting to destroy things or harm anyone, it seems to me that it's more curious than malicious.”

Maggie wonders how Agent K came to this conclusion.

“I don't really care if it's alive, dead, curious or crapulent,” the Colonel says. Good word, Maggie thinks. “Question is,” he goes on, “how do we stop it?”

“We have a plan,” Agent K says.

“What plan?” Maggie asks.

“I already explained: we go inside it.”

“That's not a plan! What do we do once we're inside?”

“Well, we can hardly know that before we get there, can we?”

The Colonel jumps in here. “Miss, the Agent here may sound overconfident, even arrogant, but I can personally attest to the fact that it comes from being *right* damn near one hundred percent of the time.”

“Thank you, Colonel,” says Agent K with a deferent nod. “And here comes the third member of our party now.”

The Singer pulls up in a screaming red fire truck with a mischievous mien.

“The fire chief,” he shouts down to them from the driver's seat, “was easily made to see my perspective on the situation and very willing to help with the temporary donation of this truck, you know, that is, based on a short little ditty of my own composition.”

“Excellent,” says Agent K. To Maggie: “Are you ready to embark?”

“Let me guess,” Maggie says, “we need to park the fire truck next to the thing's foot and climb up the ladder to get to the first handhold on the leg.”

“Absolutely correct,” says Agent K. “Your intelligence and insight clearly extend far beyond the literary and artistic realm.”

Maggie says, “Thanks.”

IT WALKS SLOWLY, TAKES ITS TIME, IN NO HURRY, WAITS FOR MINUTES between steps, leaving plenty of opportunity for a fire truck to stop beside a foot, to extend a ladder, and for three tiny humans to climb up. First goes Agent K, next The Singer, and last Maggie Write. Leg pegs begin precisely where ladder ends, length and width so perfect for human hands to grasp as if conveniently crafted for the very purpose.

“Must have been built by beings very much like humans,” The Singer calls up to Agent K, “if these pegs are in fact a means to reaching an access panel.”

“But this is definitely wood,” Agent K calls back down, “yet it doesn't seem to have been cut or processed into this shape; it's more like it simply grew this way. Note the tiny knots and imperfections. Besides, why would someone construct a space vehicle out of such relatively soft and porous material?”

“Genetically engineered, perhaps,” suggests The Singer.

“Hmm.”

Maggie Write says nothing, doesn't have much of an opinion on the matter, not her area of expertise, more concerned that one of the two old men will fall and bring all three of them down, breaking every hip in town.

It starts to take another step. No knee joint, leg just rises up into the air, ten twenty thirty degrees, articulated ankle cants up in preparation for setting back down, torso-trunk tilts in compensation, shifting centre of gravity. Three tiny humans hang on tight. When the thing levels back off, standing straight again, they double their speed, climbing up, because they're almost to the top.

His hand around final peg, highest peg, Agent K reaches up with his other arm, makes a fist and pounds with its side on wooden haunch. His knock resonates with a dark, hollow, bass drum sound. He waits a few seconds before knocking again. Another few seconds, then another two knocks. Ah, but

then: a *click!* And yes, a panel opens up, even where only smoothness was before, a human-sized garage-door hatch rises. Agent K smiles, closes his eyes for only a second to recite his silent gratitude, then grabs onto the edge of the opening and raises himself up into it. He helps The Singer and Maggie Write inside, and then the panel shuts just before succeeding step begins beginning.

Inside it's dark, but some low illumination radiates from somewhere far above them, dancing, brightening and dimming chaotically like bonfire light. Probably, they all figure, that fire spilling out from its eyes. Maggie lays her palms against the wall, and it's round, uneven yet feels burnished. Impeccably imperfect, and indeed, she thinks, very much like being within some gigantic animal, a whale or maybe a dinosaur; not at all like a house or a boat or something constructed. Not that she'd ever been inside another organism. But she senses this is what that would be like. That she has been, now. A pulsing, flowing subharmonic tone resonates all around them, all through them, at once soothing and familiar yet unsettlingly alien. It dawns on her: it feels like a cave deep underground – hermetic, self-contained, an ecology unto itself, formed by nature over years and centuries but somehow to its inhabitants' every need as if created for that very purpose. But a *moving* cave, a lumbering, living thing, part tank, part tortoise, who knows what.

She thinks she's maybe overdoing it a little now. If that was something she'd written instead of just thought, she probably would delete half of it in the second draft.

“So we're here,” she says. “What now?”

“Should have brought some flashlights,” says The Singer, “maybe ropes, other provisions, some - ”

“This will be fine,” Agent K says. So confident. For the first time, this worries Maggie.

Maggie says, “I found something,” and the others come over to see.

A staircase. An actual spiral staircase, claustrophobically narrow, without guardrail or anything, just twisting up into monster's guts or whatever wooden robots have inside them – so far, evidently not very much, neither organs nor electronics, only dark space and dim sounds – climbing up into the abyss

above. Disappearing in there.

“Obviously,” says Agent K, “we go up.”

The word “No” is squeezed from Maggie Write's body before she even knows it.

Agent K: “No?”

The Singer: “Why Not?”

Maggie Write: “I don't know. Just...no. I have a bad feeling about this. I'll stay here. I can explore this level. You can go on up. But I'll stay here.”

The Singer and Agent K give each other a brief look, though they can barely see a thing.

“Not quite sure that's a wise idea, you know,” The Singer mumbles.

“I have to agree, I think, we probably should not split up in this sort of unfamiliar situation.”

“I'm not going up there,” Maggie says. She's really not. “And I'm an adult and I am making this decision for myself. It can be very sweet when the two of you try to take care of me, protect me, and I appreciate that but it can also be totally condescending sometimes, I think you should know that. I am staying here. You two go up, and find the control panel or eject the core or drive a stake through its heart or a heart through its stake or whatever you have to do, and I'll be right here. Please.”

The Singer breaks into song, an ersatz *a capella* Irish folk type thing:

“Maggie Write / Your choice tonight / We beg you, make no fuss

“Ascend these stairs / Release your cares / and kindly come with us.”

Pretty shoddy, The Singer knows, but not exceedingly terrible for a spontaneous improvisation; besides, the trick is less the message's actual content and more how it makes the listener feel. Worse songs than that had worked for him.

“No,” Maggie repeats, revealing herself as a member of that small but proud community impervious to The Singer's vocal abilities. Also the first time ever that Agent K has been disappointed in one of The Singer's few failures. With a better-than-ninety-percent success rate for his own decisions, he's sure

enough that this is right to want Maggie to accompany them and not leave her here alone, but that remaining ten percent uncertainty also means that he hasn't sufficient confidence to make her come by force; that has, in the past, sometimes been an option under certain circumstances. But not now.

A moment of silence. They both want to argue – they both *always* want to argue – but she's right; there's no other reasonable thing they can do to make her come with them.

“All right,” says Agent K, and Maggie Write relaxes considerably. “We'll go up. You stay here. Any of us will shout if we need any help.”

The word “help” echoes eerily in the oaken dark.

“Yes,” Maggie says. “Good luck.”

/first/

MAGGIE WRITE:

Agent K and The Singer start up the staircase. It doesn't take long for them to dissolve into shadows, then disappear completely. Maggie Write is alone. Her calmer, easier breathing makes her realize that it couldn't have been the staircase at all that had been upsetting her – she's not afraid of heights or anything like that – it was the company. Nice guys and everything, The Singer and Agent K, more than a little weird, but nice. But they were making her nervous. Edgy. For this, she knows, for this she needs to be alone.

Alone. For this. Alone for *what*? What *is* this?

She doesn't know, of course. Can't know. Still true.

But she's not here to stand and cower; the point is still to stop this thing. She's not just leaving the work to the old white guys. It occurs to her now that although there's no reason to think that the mere presence of foreign organisms like themselves would cause the tree-thing to halt, since they hopped on

board she hasn't felt it moving at all, not a step, not a tilt. Either it has stopped or it has its own personal gravity; that the latter seems more plausible first annoys and disturbs her, then upon a second thought disturbs and delights her.

She decides to explore all the way around. She'll know when she's traversed it entirely when she returns to the staircase, and that way she can't get lost.

Fingertips tracing along, moving at half-speed down around the circumference...well, no, the circumference would be the measure around the *outside* of this thing, not the inside, wouldn't it? She's not a math person but there must be a word meaning the distance around the interior of a ring or cylinder that has a thickness, no? If not, there ought to be. Maggie suddenly wishes she'd brought a thesaurus with her, which is ridiculous, but there you go.

Padding along, only audibles her own breath and humming thrumming of a wooden robot which sound, maybe, is its own sort of respiration, and sneakers' rubber soles reminding her of sneaking out of her father's house at midnight in winter, old floorboards squeaking and creaking their protest.

For the longest time there's nothing nothing nothing. She begins to wonder if this was a mistake, that she should have gone with the others instead. She keeps on going, waiting to reach the staircase again.

Wall texture changes. Where it was wood it now feels like slate, and the slightest scrape of her fingernails against its surface creates in her a terrible psychoacoustic convulsion. She jumps back, turns toward. Long enough in here so that her pupils have sufficiently dilated, she can see better now than she had before even in this low light, and when she looks she sees that the wall doesn't just *feel* like a chalkboard but actually *is* one, black and dull just like her elementary school classroom's, and not only that but something is *written* thereon, in some kind of like bioluminescent chalk or something, words and paragraphs in the green-white of a traffic signal and what's more is that she recognizes it, she knows what this is:

Work over, Bella and Priti exit through the back, lock up. Aim themselves at the subway. It's dark out; when they started today, it was light. This is always unsettling. The subway station is close, just across the street. The light is red, that little red hand holds them back. No cars. But they wait anyway. They wait. They wait. Green. That little silhouette of a man lights up, flashes at them, neckless, strident. Bella stares at it, across the empty road. The man blinks. Disappears then appears again. Then disappears. Walk. Now it is safe. Around the head of Bella Kiss, silence swirls, cyclonic. Suddenly:

What.

What.

Her novel. It's her novel; it's *Kindling*. Her unpublished novel that she poured out of herself like acid sweat over years written out in chalk on the inside of a hollow giant marauding fucking tree thing from outer space. Maggie Write's blood spins. Because this? This is impossible.

Now when she lays her hands on it's deliberate and it's her oily palms and she wipes them across its surface in huge circles and spirals, smearing and obscuring, erasing, swirling the words into confused pallid galaxies and she finds herself crying and cursing and crying and scattered in cerated rage and ablated fear, annihilating chapter after chapter after chapter and she doesn't stop until

Suddenly: Earth quakes.

/second/

THE SINGER:

A story above, staircase opens onto a broad dark floor on one side, while continuing to spiral up higher ahead. The Singer stops.

“Hold on,” he says.

Agent K stops. “What is it?”

“Probably should investigate this level before heading any further, you know, the Central Power Unit is probably here, around the midsection.”

“I disagree,” says Agent K. “I believe we need to get as close to the top as possible, preferably inside the head. If it is a construct, the main processor or its equivalent will doubtless be there, and if it's a biological organism perhaps it can be communicated with from there. Either way, the fire jets are originating from within the head and we need to get those extinguished.”

“The last robot attack was stopped by shutting down the thing's power generator,” counters The Singer, “and besides, the location of jets of fire should be the *last* place you should like to be under the circumstances.”

“I am definitely proceeding up to the highest level,” says Agent K.

“Well, enjoy yourself,” says The Singer, “but when the Central Power Unit shuts down you'll not want to be so very far from the ground.”

Agent K sighs.

“Good luck,” he says.

“No such thing,” says The Singer, and darts off into darkness.

Agent K thinks that “good luck” had been the most neutral wish for fortune he could imagine; he might as well have said “may God be with you” if he'd anticipated such a terse dismissal; probably he

should have expected that reaction, though, he recalls, The Singer had not rejected this very same well-wishing when it came from the lips of young Doctor Miss Maggie Write.

Anyway.

Agent K inhales and charges up the stairs.

Unlike Maggie, who'd decided just a minute prior to stick to walls, The Singer chooses a direction perpendicular to the stairhead and plunges forth in a straight line gloomward. Not due to any bravery greater than Maggie Write's, which even he would admit; he simply believes he knows what to look for and where it can be found – where it *will* be found. In terms of location he turns out to be correct – interesting stuff on this level planted right at centre stage, as it were – but as for said intension's object? Couldn't be wronger.

Several metres of striding steps from staircase, The Singer snags a shoelace on...something...and pitches forward. As fortune would have it – or not fortune, of course not fortune, nothing so absurdly anthropomorphic, so foolishly mindlike, but more like due to absolutely blind and random forces which for some reason (or, come to think of it, to be perfectly consistent, for *absolutely no reason at all*) happen to be surprisingly comprehensible if we only but try to comprehend, for what else is science after all than the process of attempting to understand the understandable, what else *could* it be? – he doesn't just spill forward and smash his face into hard wood in an invisible void spitting blood and spraying teeth all about, but instead lands rather gently in a cushiony softness of something like the head of a giant sunflower, actually an inflorescence of eight meters in diameter sprouting up as if planted right there in the floor, glowing dully with its own bioluminescence so that The Singer can see when he lands in its squishy centre it's actually more like a mushroom (of course it is, after all, it couldn't very well live by photosynthesis alone here in this near-total darkness, unless it isn't alive at all, which The Singer still believes – that it isn't) and what he tripped over was a root or stalk or vine or

tentacle seemingly half-buried in the solid surface beneath his feet: imagine like maybe a great potted octopus or something.

His feet still tangled in tendrils, now broad triangular petals fold in, clamp down, trapping The Singer at thing's centre. His heart runs a full lap around inside his chest, and through clenched teeth he mutters an uncharacteristic scatological imprecation.

Then:

Hello.

“What? Who said that?” The Singer asks. “Is someone there?”

I am here. I said it.

“Well, yes, all right, but who are you?” He can't determine voice's identity or even its source, only that neither Agent K nor Maggie Write is the speaker.

I don't understand the question.

“What?”

I said, I don't understand the question. Can you be more specific?

The Singer is baffled by this.

“Well, you know, that is...are you a person? A machine? Are you the voice of this...this thing, this flower? Are you the pilot or a passenger in this wooden construct, or are you, you know, the construct itself? Are you alive, or were you built by someone? What are you doing here, what do you want?”

I'm afraid I don't know how to answer any of those questions. You set up these apparent dichotomies and seem to expect me to select one of each pair as if they all mutually exclude each other.

The Singer decides to take a different tack at this point.

“You came to this planet, you're causing destruction, and we, the inhabitants of Earth, can't allow it to continue.”

It seems as if you're the one who's...invaded me...not the other way around.

“Only to prevent you from causing more damage to our city! If you'll simply cease and desist – ”

These distinctions of yours are very difficult for me to comprehend. Are you alive? Are you a machine? What is this damage? What is – oh.

At this point, line of questioning ends because

Suddenly: Earth quakes.

/third/

AGENT K:

Fire crackles. Heat swells. As if, unable to withstand their own irrepressible illumination flames in compensation choose to produce a screen of smoke in which to hide instead, floating and spiralling like stars in the firmament or a splash of white cream in a black expanse of coffee down into Agent K's present locale. Staircase ends and Agent K deposits himself in torso's topmost territory yet finds himself still below his target, presumably where he, alone as he may be, might be able to affect some positive action. He needs only raise his gaze to see it: THE HEAD. Whence arises mind and thought and where, Agent K believes and hopes, a being can be reasoned with or, failing that, incapacitated.

Unsurprised to find a sort of ladder at compartment's centre, by this point no longer failing to expect convenient coincidences, he makes for it: a kind of marcescent pole or stake much like a lithe naked beech trunk but with knobs or pegs – hand-holds at any rate – all along its height. He grabs one with each hand. Looking up he sees a round esophageal opening in this area's ceiling through which said pole rises up and then disappears smothered in darkness like the inside of a smoker's throat. He steels himself, holds his breath and ascends.

Up here now in its cylinder of a head, no more trouble with visibility despite surrounding smoky plumes. On his knees for only a second, Agent K gets to his feet on sturdy floorboards as soon as he

traverses the circular absence that grants access. Enormously hot in here, yet not nearly so hot as probably it should be, making Agent K suspect some sort of cooling apparatus at work simultaneously with whatever engine drives the fire from its eyes. Immediately he sees that for which he believes he has been searching:

But before time enough passes to register this information he realizes with a speed practically precognitive that he must get down as flat as he can, because

Two jets of flame erupt, spewing across the expanse of head's interior and exploding from the pair of eyes across – eyes that permit light and air in just as they let fire and smoke and heat out. Only scarcely singed, no harm no foul as they say (a sports metaphor for which he normally has no reference or use), but Agent K keeps his breath held and his eyes shut until these flames subside. After which he immediately springs up like a man one-twelfth his age, runs like a man one-tenth his age who is also maybe some kind of two-legged horse or, like, something really fast, whatever, and manages to crush himself against cylinder's wall out of flames' path, avoiding *line of fire* as it were, so when these burning blasts emerge again he won't get barbecued like a dragon's dinner.

Now then; that thing that was to be described earlier:

This entire cranial compartment appears to be the main part of a *steam engine* driving the creature's locomotion. Fire and smoke shoot, when they shoot, from what Agent K recognizes as a kind of what's called a *firebox*, a chamber normally filled with pressurized water and located to the rear of a boiler (which Agent K cannot see, but which he assumed must be there on its opposite side); through tubes (generally on earth constructed of metal but here, amazingly, not to say miraculously, wood suffices and somehow manages not to itself combust) wherein water is converted to steam and smoke and fire are periodically expunged – this, Agent K presumes, would be the deal with the eyes. Agent K knows a great deal about steam engines, having personally traversed the continent on said continent's very first locomotive over a century ago. He nostalgizes for a moment, if you'll forgive the verbatation.

Fantastic! thinks Agent K to himself, while also of course attempting to construct a means to shut the whole thing down. But first, just in case:

“Hello?” he calls. “Can anyone hear me?”

Only his own voice's echo and driving pulsing grinding of extraordinary alien technology. His wish had been to find a mind here, but upon entering this chamber his hope had quickly fallen. Maybe he'd been wrong, maybe he should have stayed with The Singer, or both of them with Maggie Write. He wasn't infallible. Sometimes he needed to be reminded of that. He's good, very good, but he's not perfect.

Anyway, no time for that now. Observing the jets' periodic spewing he believes he's calculated their period. He thinks he should be able to get past them during the lull between eruptions and over to their source, at which point he can only pray there will be enough time for him to execute his hastily formed plan.

Fire blasts forth.

He waits.

One.

Two.

Three.

Four.

Fire ceases to blast.

He runs.

Makes it to the firebox and employs violence. He kicks at it, raising one leg up and pummelling the thing with his foot, standing at right angles. He does this again. And again. On the fourth kick – the last, by his calculation, that he would have time to make – its wood cracks, splits, and with overwhelming pressure from within, explodes forth in a great flood of water, steam, and viscous oily

fluid that Agent K can only assume is fuel.

Suddenly: Earth quakes.

But wait: no. Not Earth. The robot. Its whole, huge, wooden body. That's what quakes.

Just to be safe he throws himself back, lands face-down on the floor and covers his head with his hands, because who knows. But it's not necessary. He's done it. With fuel and boiler emptying out through the new opening in the firebox, no flames issue forth this time, presently the shaking stops, and the enormous wooden robot that fell from the sky halts in its steps, ceases and desists.

Agent K gets to his feet again. He dusts himself off. He catches his breath. Before heading back down to retrieve his compatriots he marches over to the windows of the creature's eyes to overlook the city that they have yet again helped to save.

It had come quite a long way since they'd boarded, he sees. Where had it stopped? Just across the street from Agent K's beloved, if neglected, Generic House of Worship, so close that if it hadn't been halted within, let's say, the next two or three minutes, it could have plowed right into the stately sanctuary (and municipal heritage site), or at least set it aflame. Agent K breathes a sigh of additional relief, and whispers his gratitude.

But but but then

It occurs to Agent K that he has never actually observed Generic House of Worship from this high up before. On this side, the east side, stained glass windows coming to parabolic vertices so close to building's roof that they were completely invisible to an observer standing modestly on the ground. Its colourful patterns are beautiful, of course, but more than that. At the very top, the peak of the central window, is depicted a figure disturbing, delightful, luminous with revelatory familiarity.

That man. That green-white silhouette of a man. That traffic-light man, from Maggie's novel. That man whom Agent K had seen escaping from L'Étranger the day of the earthquake. Yes, that man.

5. *the deontic modality of being.*

Trampling downstairs two and three steps at a time comes Agent K. Arriving down at Second Story he calls for his companion The Singer; hears nought but muffled tones somewhere in central darkness. Wades out there only to find a pair of sprindly grey-trouserred legs peeking and waving from convergence-point of four mandibular fronds, themselves sprouted from some kind of vermicular fungus rooted with vines or stalks into floor's wood. Shocked, Agent K grabs The Singer by his shoes and yanks him backwards; surprisingly to Agent K, The Singer emerges with no resistance, so, in his urgency having used a disproportionate amount of force for this extraction, Agent K collapses on his coccyx with The Singer atop him.

“What did you do that for?” The Singer growls, annoyed. “Was finally just starting to get somewhere with that thing.”

“I’m terribly sorry,” says Agent K, having no idea what The Singer is on about and no time to concern himself with it anyway, “but we really ought to be going. The creature is stopped, and I have a new idea of the location of the walk-signal man! Let’s find Maggie and get going at once.”

They extricate themselves from each other and get back to their feet, regarding the now-still plant thing suspiciously.

“To where?” asks The Singer.

“Generic House of Worship!”

At this The Singer scoffs.

“Why, is there a concert tonight?”

Agent K dignifiedly ignores this.

Stomp downstairs to Floor First. Call to Maggie, who answers at once, stepping diffidently out from

darkness like a demanded author at curtain call.

“Yeah,” she says. “Hello.” Her face all ruddy, wet.

“Oh my goodness!” says Agent K. “Are you all right? Have you been *crying*?”

“Little bit,” Maggie Write says. Then a decisive sniff. “Okay now.”

They two take her word for it. Agent K explains present situation a second time.

“Generic House of Worship?” Maggie says, indeed seeming in most part emotionally recovered from whatever upsetting thing had happened to her. “I just saw a show there last weekend. It was really good actually. The place has awesome acoustics.” Which irritates Agent K a bit but he doesn't let it show. He's neglected its intended purpose these past several decades too, after all, so he supposes he must also share a portion of blame for any dereliction of its sanctity. At least it's still being used for *something*, no matter how irreverent.

They exit as they entered: together.

W

Generic House of Worship has enormous doors. As different as each of its four faces may be, tastes and convictions of all its myriad architects, craftspersons and intended congregants spanning conceptual millennia and actual centuries, one thing on which they all could agree was that its doors should be ridiculously large. One result of this: depending on which direction the wind happens to be blowing you may have a great deal of difficulty trying to open one of them all by yourself. This was not such a problem in times when regular mass attendance could be safely assumed. Ten people, say, would have no difficulty opening any of its entrances. So the hundreds upon hundreds for whom it was a weekly or even daily destination – not to mention the semiannual swarms – would rarely if ever have

had any trouble with it. Agent K remembers those days.

Not so today. As metaphysics became an increasingly unfashionable interest in polite society turnout for services declined steadily, if not asymptotically, until an individual seeking entry could find her or himself in an intense struggle with a damn *door* if weather conditions were unideal and no doubt many who were shut out simply went home and never came back, considering the matter settled. While technically this violates municipal standards for accessibility, no one has come forth to complain about it. As a result, besides during special events such as concerts, Generic House of Worship mainly stands vacant.

Its doors, of course, are just as big and heavy inside as outside, so anyone who did manage to enter, upon completing whatever spiritual business at hand, could find him or herself not only trapped but alone. Hence rumours and legends arising of its halls being haunted by unfortunate ragtag assortments of pious ghosts. Never has there been a credible, verifiable report of such a thing, though, or any actual evidence, and Agent K, though not in principle opposed to the possibility of ghosts, has no reason to believe in their existence either, and certainly not here in particular.

He doesn't know what he'll find when he goes in there. But he knows what he's looking for. Sort of. He doesn't think it's a ghost. But if it is, fine. At least then that will be settled.

The western-facing door is wood, ornately carved, vertically oblong. Not Agent K's favourite of the four sides, but closest; the robot thing was facing west when it stopped. In his excitement running far ahead of Maggie Write and The Singer he grabs its handle and pulls and it opens right up for him. He gallops inside and it closes again before either of the others even reach it.

But when The Singer gets there and tries its handle it won't budge. Has the wind shifted? Perhaps. Or maybe he just doesn't have the upper-body strength of a man more than two centuries his senior. Maggie Write arrives next and adds her youthful force, but even for both of them together, it just refuses to comply.

“Fine, okay,” Maggie says, “let’s try the other doors, then. We’ll split up. They all end up in the same place, right? The wind can’t blow in every direction at once.”

“Agreed,” says The Singer. That’s only logical.

Maggie runs in the direction of Generic House of Worship’s northward face, while The Singer instead heads south.

But they all end up in the same place. Right?

N

This door opens for Maggie with no trouble.

Inside, though? Another story.

Quite literally she’s not where she was just a week ago when she attended that concert, though she entered through this very same door then. When she turns back, even the door is gone.

She sighs, like, *oh, and now this*. Hasn’t yet quite managed to learn not to be surprised in this town.

Instead of where she wanted to be: it looks like a mall food court, but totally deserted, as it would be in the middle of the night, though it was broad daylight outside just a second ago. You know, before the door disappeared. Another thing: there don’t seem to be any entrances or exits of any kind – no escalators (though she can clearly see an upper level, just no way to get to it), no eight-lane hallways swollen with kiosks, nothing. No way out.

Clearly an impossible place. But somehow familiar. She takes very slow steps through the aisles of plastic table-and-chair sets trying to figure it out. Has she been here before? She’s been here before. But no, she hasn’t. *Here* has been to *her* before.

What.

She wrote this place. This? This is a scene from her novel. A scene from *Kindling*. Where Bella and Priti have coffee on their fifteen-minute break from their soul-deadening front-line retail jobs.

With this realization she needs to sit down for a minute. She sits down.

Across from someone who certainly was not there a second ago.

The woman looking at Maggie is younger than she is, and taller, and skinner, but just a little bit of each of these. Their hair is the same maddening black-that-could-be-red, like drying magma, but Maggie's is longer and curlier in that just-can't-do-anything-with-it kind of way. They've nearly the same face, the two of them, except the one who isn't Maggie's is narrower, nose a little shorter in profile.

Maggie stares at her with wide, nonplussed eyes; the other seems relatively plussed in comparison (q.v. references to Maggie Write's desk reference dictionary, in which “plussed” fails to appear; still she feels it must be a legitimate word if *nonplussed* is, even if she always confuses *nonplussed* with *nonchalant*, which two words are really practically antonyms themselves – she needs a better dictionary, maybe, but the good ones are always so *expensive*).

To this woman, this idealized, Photoshopped, Glamour Shots version of herself, Maggie Write says:

“Bella. Bella Kiss.”

-Yeah, says Bella. Nice to know you remember me.

Maggie says: “Bella? *Bella Kiss*?” and Bella rolls her eyes.

-I believe we have already established that.

“But...how are you...where is this...what's going...?”

-I think it's only fair that I get to be the one asking the questions, for once, Bella says, and Maggie has absolutely no idea what she is talking about.

“I have absolutely no idea what you are talking about,” Maggie says.

-That's funny, says Bella, because here I was assuming you were the one who could give *me* some

answers. Such as to the following: *what the fuck?* Why would you do this to me?

“Do? Do what to you? What did I do?”

-Stupendous, Bella says, it finally turns out that God *does* exist, and lo and behold She's a complete idiot.

“What? *God?* I'm not God.”

-Well, what would you call it then? You created me, didn't you? You created me and then you gave me fucking *epilepsy*.

“What?”

-Say *what* again, Bella quotes. Say *what* again, I dare you. I *double*-toucan dare you.

“Look, uh, Bella,” Maggie restarts, “I'm sorry but I – ”

-Don't sorry me. You gave me epilepsy. That is a serious illness. Did I do something wrong? Was I being punished for something? Because I searched my conscience, all *Book of Job* and such, and could not think of anything that would have made me deserve that level of bullshit.

“I...it...” Maggie stammers. “It was a metaphor.”

-How comforting.

Maggie just shakes her head at Bella, uncomprehending.

-Look, this shouldn't be complicated. For *you*, this shouldn't be complicated *for you*. You might just be the next rung up the ontological ladder from me and there could be a hundred more above you, but that shouldn't matter. It's the classic Problem of Evil, right? I'm going to go ahead and say that I was a good person, and bad things happened to me. You were the one who made me a good person, and the one who made the bad things happen, so what gives here.

Framed for her in these terms, Maggie actually comes up with a response.

“Wait, wait. I've got it,” she says too eagerly. “It's because I'm *not* God. I'm your creator but I'm not God, and I'm not perfect and I'm not all-good. I'm not God, so I don't have to be.”

-And does that make you feel better about yourself? Bella spits back. That you're not God? So you don't have to be good? Total cop-out.

“That's not what I said.”

-I think that's exactly what you said. You're painting yourself into a corner here, so I want you to be very careful going ahead.

“Hey, look,” Maggie says defensively. “Look, I'm just a person. I'm your creator, okay, but let's not get mean.”

-Or what, you'll turn me into a newt, or smite me or something? Go ahead.

Maggie keeps quiet.

-That's what I thought, says Bella. If you tell me that you're an evil demon who just created me to have fun torturing me, I can accept that. I mean, it sucks, but fine, at least that would be consistent. But if you can sit there across from me and tell me that you created me and gave me epilepsy and made my boyfriend dump me and all that other bullshit, *and* that you're also a good person, a moral person, that you wouldn't hurt a fly, then I need to know how that makes any fucking sense, because from this side of the table it seems like the classic justification for rejecting your existence completely, except that *there you are*.

Maggie remains silent. But looks like she's thinking.

-Take your time, Bella says.

Maggie says: “Look, shut up for a second.” Goes on thinking.

Somehow, she understands, this is what that was all about back in the belly of the beast, with her novel inexplicably written up there in chalk. It was there. She didn't put it there, but it was there anyway. And now here's Bella Kiss, fictional Bella Kiss, in an imaginary food court where Generic House of Worship is supposed to be. The earthquakes. The traffic-light man.

Maggie closes her eyes. Opens her mouth. Closes it again. Says: “Oh shit.”

S

This door opens for The Singer with no trouble; inside, though, another story altogether – never has he been here until today, not because of any particular boycott or anything like that, not like the annual municipal barbecue or that stretch of highway “adopted” by the stubbornly persistent émigré special-interest group known as *Friends of Democristan*. If there were some event or other that had interested him occurring at Generic House of Worship he would have attended. It holds no attraction for him, is all. He does not enjoy rock music and they do not schedule classical performances there (another way in which he and Agent K differ – a topic over which they've argued many times – even though both of them count themselves fans of what's broadly termed in common parlance as classical music, Agent K maintains devotion to melodic refinements of, say, Mozart or even Liszt, whereas The Singer prefers later, harsher, what he would call *realer* pieces by Schoenberg, Debussy, *et al*); Generic House of Worship has been used several times as a polling station during elections, but The Singer's home lies outside that district. Still, he'd expected something, you know, *ecclesiastical*. Not...whatever this is.

When he turns back, even the door is gone. Which does surprise him. He hadn't been aware of any sort of entrance-shrouding technology available to those at the time of Generic House of Worship's building. In fact it would have to have been some pretty advanced technology indeed to have seemingly erased even the wall itself from existence and replaced it with...well, it looks as if he's in some sort of a *garden*. Not even like a classic orchard type of garden which may possibly be associated with the Adam and Eve story, for example, which would be unconventional but at least thematically appropriate, but a garden like one might find in the back yard of an impossibly rich old man in a

bygone era – Agent K's era, perhaps – who, in his spiteful prohibition against his wife taking employment outside their home, has practically forced her to spend her days attempting to derive some sense of personal fulfilment pottering around on her knees in the dirt growing onions and carrots and things instead.

A garden, basically. Except clearly still indoors, some sort of marmoreal masonry walling them in on every side, only rear wall – where Generic House of Worship's outer wall should be, where the door through which The Singer entered should be but isn't – having somehow silently retreated six or eight metres back in an eyeblink's time.

A fog of humid gloom begins closing in on him – ambient atmosphere like a hothouse or greenhouse in here – and he takes a few steps forward into the rows of sod – cautious steps, but he attempts to maintain an air of nonchalance nonetheless, for whom, he has no idea, he just likes to remain unruffled in case anyone is watching or perhaps recording him. He does not always succeed.

Someone *is* watching him.

A figure stooped in soil some ways off stands up to regard The Singer. Dressed in black, this figure, full-length and formless sleeves and pants – an uncommon choice of apparel for rooting about in dirt, one would imagine. Also wearing a black straw hat. This figure straightens itself up, revealing itself as an adust-faced man of indeterminate age with several inches of height in his favour over The Singer, and comes toward him, approaches The Singer this figure does, his movements so fluent and his clothing so loose as to seem almost as if he were gliding or sliding on ice or air rather than walking across ground.

Certainly, though, he must have been walking.

“Good day,” he says in a funereal voice, with a queer inflection that makes it difficult for The Singer to tell whether it's meant as a greeting or a favourable evaluation of prevailing weather conditions.

“Good day,” The Singer replies. A safe bet. “If it's not too forward a question...who are you?”

The figure smirks. “Call me Gardner.”

“Gardner,” The Singer repeats. Obvious enough. “Call me,” he says, enjoying that phrasing very much, “The Singer.”

“Like plants?” Gardner asks.

This does not quite immediately register.

“I’m sorry?”

“You like plants?” Gardner says, even more lugubrious than before, as if just realizing this person to whom he’s speaking may be an idiot.

“Oh. Well, yes, certainly. Certainly I like plants. They’re...they’re all I eat. Vegan, you know.” Which on immediate reflection may not have been the best response, The Singer thinks. But Gardner smiles at this, actual cracks appearing in the sides of his friable face – which looks as if it probably should hurt but the figure shows no indicant of pain – his lips spreading, revealing wide and unusually brilliant teeth.

“Recognize this?” Gardner produces some round object from an unseen pocket, tosses it at The Singer, who struggles to catch it. He studies it, rolls it around in his hands.

What is it?” The Singer asks.

“You tell me.”

The Singer considers it again: a perfect sphere, size of a medium-sized apple or onion, heavyish, made of wood, maybe pine, totally smooth as if machine-sanded, seemingly stained with some sort of varnish.

“Well, you know, hard to tell, really. Is it perhaps for bowling, five-pin bowling or some such?”

Gardner keeps on smiling. “It’s a seed,” he says.

“A seed? Certainly not. This is obviously synthetic, look at its shape and texture; it’s vaguely similar, perhaps to the legendary *coco de mer* or Maldive coconut, but then – ”

Gardner raises a hand and shushes him; something that happens to The Singer far too often for his liking, doesn't anyone have any manners anymore?

"This field," Gardner says, "is sown full of them. I'm but their tender – their midwife, if you will. They begin as seeds, they sprout, they shoot up like rockets, it can sometimes take a year, or two, or three, or seventeen. But when they reach maturity...well. You've seen."

The Singer doesn't understand. "Seen? What do you mean, how have – " But then he gets it. "That thing? It grew from a seed like this? It was natural after all? But that's impossible. Impossible. It came from outer space, it was robotic, clearly *mechanical*, or technological at least, you wouldn't call a television set alive just because it was encased in a wooden cabinet – " a design which The Singer once enjoyed and was sad to have seen fall out of fashion, as a matter of fact.

Gravely, Gardner says simply, "You are mistaken."

Sick of this double-talk, this ongoing nonsense, these useless purple metaphors obviously concocted only to baffle and annoy him, to lead him off the track, The Singer composes himself, fixes on Gardner his sternest, most professorial expression, and says: "Now look, what exactly is going on around here? The entrance to Generic House of Worship surely doesn't lead to, you know, some kind of a garden; many strange things can be accounted for but this is clearly...clearly is...I mean, what *is this?*"

E

This door opens for Agent K with no trouble and inside is exactly what he expected it would be: Generic House of Worship's interior, a miracle of architecture, but a miracle forgotten, a miracle that has been there for so long you've forgotten that's what it is. Miracles have to happen right in front of you; miracles have to be *new* to have any impact. Everything natural occurs more than once. Not even

Agent K had been around for its construction, but nobody alive today, nobody that Agent K knew, at any rate, paid any attention to how astounding an accomplishment the building actually is. This thing is *astounding*.

A square on the outside yet somehow circular within. Rounded pulpit tucked inside northmost “corner,” hundreds hundreds hundreds of fixed seats, once new full and plush, lately more threadbare from disregard but still surprisingly comfortable to sit in, twenty-six arced rows divided by a single broad aisle in the middle, rising up at a slight incline toward the southern side like a stadium.

Nice to be here, Agent K thinks. He'll have to make an effort to start coming again. But today's purpose lies elsewhere; specifically, upstairs, at the highest level, where the stained-glass windows are. That's where he will start.

He heads to the staircase, also somehow a spiral that traverses the entire circumference, and just goes up and up and up. He doesn't recall, actually, how many floors there are, and there's a distinct lack of signs telling him where he in fact is, but fortunately that doesn't matter right now. He is going to the top. He just climbs steps until there are no steps left to climb and then he stops, a little out of breath, a little pain in his knees, but just a little. In as good shape as he is, Agent K certainly has not been a young man for a very long time, though he remembers what it was like to be one.

Stairs stop. Agent K goes back out to top-floor's main open area from the stairwell, to the westmost face, where the windows terminate in their arched peaks. They are truly beautiful, Agent K thinks, though thick-skinned with dust and all knitted with spider webs. But neither is he there to admire them. He searches and searches for the figure, the traffic-light man, for his first clue. But finds nothing. Plenty of figures there, people and animals, angels and abstract images, but not what had leaped out at him as he looked over from inside wooden robot eyes. He's sure it was here. He knows he saw it, he even knows *where* he saw it. This one. This is where it should be. But he looks there and that place where a green-white stick figure had been stooped in mid-step, flattened, digitless forelimbs and minus

a neck, is empty, just a bizarre field of pale yellow glass where clearly something ought to be. Agent K stands there mystified.

A sound from behind him. He turns and sees the door to the stairwell closing, as if someone had just run through it. Maybe The Singer or Maggie Write? They had been right behind him. Maybe, but why wouldn't they come inside, speak to him? He bounds over, goes through the door himself. No one. Footsteps, though, quick ones, clearly audible from down there. Someone trying to escape. Who? Why? Agent K follows, leaping downstairs as fast as safely possible, maybe even a little faster than that. All the way down, until just as he approaches ground, he hears another door closing – this time an enormous door, a door too large for one person to handle if the wind blows wrong.

Reaches the door, though inside he can't tell now which side. Shut, but recently open – he knows this. He tries to open it. And does. It opens and he's looking out at the eastern courtyard – down the path leading to Generic House of Worship's perfectly level, perfectly full water pool. Shocks his heart like a defibrillator, like a vision of a long-lost love. Sprinting like an Olympian down that path?

A man-shaped figure, glowing green-white, animated in three dimensions, almost holographic. Agent K sees this with his own eyes and it's real. Wants to shout out, ask it to stop, but no words come. He just runs, chases.

Walk-signal man reaches pond's edge. Simply hops perhaps thirty centimetres in the air, inertia still carrying forward, and slips down into the water feet first and sinks like a nail dropped straight down into a bucket. No splash, no nothing, surface tension remains supernaturally still.

Agent K follows. He doesn't understand, but he acts. Time for understanding later. Following the figure of light. Jumps. Water welcomes him and down into its depths he disappears.

Theoretical

Introduction and Argument

The ethics of authorship is a subject which has attracted not insignificant controversy over the past decade. In academic circles the discussion has mainly centred around issues of plagiarism and misattribution. In the popular media, discussion on the topic has largely been concerned with writers of purported *non-fiction* who subsequently are discovered to have been exaggerating or entirely inventing events in their books which they claimed to be fact (such as James Frey's infamous “memoir,” *A Million Little Pieces*). Other writers have circumvented this issue by calling their works “fiction” despite being almost entirely authentic and autobiographical in content (for example, Dave Eggers's *A Heartbreaking Work of Staggering Genius*, but this tactic is well-established in modern literature, going back to James Joyce's bildungsroman *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* and earlier); the apparent assumption being that by labelling a work as fiction one avoids the requirement of confining one's work to the strictly *true*. Ongoing battles have always raged between the artistic community and state or religious authorities over what sort of fiction is morally appropriate for publication (such as, again, James Joyce, whose novel *Ulysses* was widely banned by governments for its alleged obscenity) – and recent outcries, mostly by right-wing religious groups, over the supposed “corrupting” influence on children of popular fantasy novels (most famously J.K. Rowling's *Harry Potter* series) is only the latest manifestation of this long-standing ideological conflict.

But nearly all the discourse on the subject has been framed in terms of freedom of expression versus censorship, that is, in political terms; the argument seems to be that an author of fiction is

either morally responsible for the content of his or her work in view of the potentially negative consequences the work may have on the audience as citizens of a particular nation, or else a writer should be considered morally free to write and publish anything he or she pleases by virtue of the legal/political right to freedom of expression. Practically none of the discourse has been considered in *philosophical* or *narratological* terms: assuming a writer is assured the legal right to publish anything he or she pleases, what ethical responsibility is there in creating a work of fiction; or, indeed, there is any such duty whatsoever? Assuming there is, to whom is this consideration owed? Under what philosophical schema would such a duty be prescribed?

If such an ethical obligation exists for writers of fiction it is imperative that it be clearly formulated and articulated, but no one up to this point has taken on the task of doing so. This paper will take the form of a meditation investigating some of these issues using an interdisciplinary model spanning cultural studies, communication/literary theory, semiotics, moral philosophy and cognitive narratology to identify and explicate these problematic issues, and come to some conclusions for how to resolve them.

The Telepathy of Writing and Art as Speech-Act

First of all, what is writing? Prolific popular author Stephen King, in his memoir/how-to book *On Writing*, offers an answer that has surprising theoretical relevance to the ethical issues at hand: “Telepathy, of course” (King 103). He intends this definition quite literally. Writing is, according to King, the transmission of meaningful symbols from one human mind to another across space and time, and following this explanation it is difficult to disagree with him. Writing is, of course, in most ways merely the visible record of language, and so what King is actually suggesting here is a theory of mind that holds functional communication as primary – writing must transmit meaningful contents of another mind in order to be considered writing at all; for instance, the formation of word-shaped structures by random environmental forces would not satisfy the definition. This is a fairly well-established attitude – i.e., that communication “requires that each speaker intentionally make himself interpretable to the other” (Davidson 114); this entails the existence of at least two “speakers” (in this case a *writer* and a *reader*, as we will come to examine more closely when we come to Barthes), a mutual interpretability, and a degree of conscious intentionality.

Because this concept is vital to coming to an answer to the question of the ethical responsibilities of a writer of fiction, in case this is not obvious, we should briefly address why the opposing viewpoint is incoherent. The definition of language that would interfere with King's idea of writing was promoted by Lacan, who held that “language is the condition of the unconscious” (Lacan in Blonsky 206), leading him to conclude that the components of language,

namely its *signs*, are “an obstacle to the grasp of the signifier” (204). Lacan seems to have abhorred the idea that language could possibly function as a form of conscious communication, or, as he put it, “an occult phenomenon that is supposed to show something telepathic” (ibid) – precisely what King explicitly, and unashamedly, says that it is. It would be senseless even to attempt to come to a theory of the ethics of fiction from this Lacanian perspective, and so it is necessary to show, before proceeding, why Lacan's idea cannot hold.

The requirement in Lacan's theory of language that any meaning can only adhere to the sign, as it were, *a posteriori*, is his attempt to resolve the problem of intersubjective communication with regard to the intentionality of propositional attitudes. The peculiar asymmetry that exists between our immediate knowledge of our own mental states and our purely empirical means of gaining what we believe to be knowledge of the mental states of others creates, for Lacan, an unresolvable paradox for the concept of communication. He chooses to eliminate the problem entirely by, in essence, eliminating intersubjectivity, eliminating communication by making language into “the condition of the unconscious” and thus no longer requiring any objective externalities to serve as the intension of the propositional attitudes of the subject. Lacan would have that communication through language is impossible because, in order to gain knowledge of other minds through intersubjective action there needs to be a medium for the transmission of this knowledge that exists objectively. “Belief is a condition of knowledge...having a belief demands...appreciating the contrast between true belief and false, between appearance and reality, mere seeming and being” (Davidson 209). This is something that Lacan's framework cannot countenance, since it necessitates a relationship between signifier and signified that implies the placement of the subject within a larger manifold that is itself objective, and Lacan's

post-structuralist ontology rejects this. On the contrary, he has to find that language in fact represents the *dissimulation* of the meaning of the subject, as he points out when he says that “what has to be recognized, as Freud says, is not what is expressed, but what is repressed” (Lacan in Blonsky 209), and that nothing is ever communicated and we only “receive” the “messages” that we want to hear rather than anything intentionally interpretable.

Lacan's own writing seems to want to advocate for this sense of uncommunicability by virtue of its own seemingly obfuscatory language, and we may be forgiven for dismissing Lacan's ideas solely on how much they disagree with our intuition; indeed, if language can only ever manage to conceal rather than reveal, why does Lacan attempt to use language to explain his theories at all? The contradiction is pointed out by Steven Pinker in his own writing on the connection between language and consciousness: “by their very effort to convince others of the truth of relativism, relativists are committed to the notion of objective truth. They attract supporters by persuasion – the marshaling of facts and logic -- not by bribes or threats. They confront their critics using debate and reason, not by dueling with pistols or throwing chairs like the guests on a daytime talk show. And if asked whether their brand of relativism is a pack of lies, they would deny that it is, not waffle and say that the question is meaningless” (Pinker 247), and Lacan was singled out for personal criticism by Alan Sokal in his attack on post-modern pseudoscience, *Fashionable Nonsense*. That said, even without resorting to accusations of Lacan in general, it can be shown that his attempt to undermine the meaningfulness of language fails simple by examining it closely.

Lacan relies here on the aforementioned assumption that language is “the condition of the unconscious,” but the Lacanian unconscious is not the same as the Freudian unconscious whence

the term came, or the Jungian concept of either the personal or collective unconscious. Lacan describes the unconscious variously in his work as a gap or rupture between signifier and signifier, and as such that it only becomes apparent in the mistakes or failures of language rather than its successes – the unconscious is “structured” as a language insofar as it consists in being a language-shaped hole in the human mind that occasionally spits out accidental evidence of its existence, like a singularity in space secretly radiating the remnants of what it had previously captured. The Lacanian unconscious is a non-existence that only comes into being through others and in relation to the Other (Homer 71); how can such a thing be a subject? By Lacan's own terms it can't because, lacking any agency, the unconscious cannot therefore be subject to conditions or itself be a condition of anything, proving Lacan's argument to be untenable. Furthermore, Lacan's statement that the unconscious comes to being through others also undermines his own denial of the possibility of intersubjectivity that makes his formulation of the unconscious necessary in the first place. While it may be argued that the limitations of language constrict the possibilities for human thought (as was argued, for example, by Wittgenstein), it cannot be the case that language dissimulates meaning by virtue of being a condition of the unconscious. We may proceed with the knowledge that it is in fact communication through language that allows us, through “triangulation,” to identify the characteristics of the world and its objects. This is what is meant by novelist Haruki Murakami when he writes “Existence is communication, and communication, existence” (Murakami 142); philosopher Martin Buber's statement that “all actual life is encounter” (Buber 62), Donald Davidson, following Wittgenstein, says straight out, “The source of the concept of objective truth is interpersonal communication” (Donaldson 209). The theory of mind expounded by King

therefore succeeds, and it is indeed sensible to seek a theory of the ethics of writing fiction. In fact, in direct contradiction of Lacan, the emerging field of Cognitive Narratology, combining the discoveries of narrative theory and the cognitive sciences, have begun to show that language is the condition of the *conscious*, or, more precisely, that human consciousness appears to be *story-shaped*.

Writing, as all language must, communicates intersubjectively, but is fiction the sort of communication that requires an ethical theory at all? This comes to the heart of the reason why novels masquerading as memoirs raise such fury and the sense of personal betrayal on the part of readers, while autobiographies claiming to be fiction do not: the former violates the implied contract between writer and reader (sender and receiver, respectively) as to the content of the message. Someone who claims to be making a statement of fact is ethically responsible for breaking the understood terms of the communication if it turns out that the speaker knowingly transmitted a falsehood instead; however someone who only claims to be telling a story is free to add as much or as little truth as he pleases without violating the terms of this contract. He may be violating some other contract (for example, if in his fiction he divulges secrets that he was meant to keep, the person to whom he promised to keep the secret is unlikely to be placated by the writer claiming it was only part of a work of fiction – the Woody Allen film *Deconstructing Harry* addresses this problem in some depth), but the receiver of the message has agreed with the transmitter that no part of the message needs to be “true,” in the sense of corresponding to reality, being composed entirely of accurate, factual statements. What, then, would be the point of a theory of the ethics of fiction?

The answer is provided, albeit indirectly, by J.L. Austin in his lectures, later published as *How*

to Do Things With Words. Austin points out that for much of the history of the philosophy of language, it was assumed that any sensible statement must have a *truth value* – that is, describe a state of affairs or make a claim of fact that is verifiable or falsifiable, at least in principle; this assumption led to the very strange conclusion that much of the speech that we engage in actually turns out to be strictly nonsense, regardless of how grammatical the sentence may be. In working to extricate the philosophy of language from this conundrum, Austin proposed new categories of statements and new descriptions of familiar ones; the most important category Austin introduced was that of the *speech-act*, or *performative utterance*; this is a statement that does not constate anything, cannot be described as “true or false,” and that the very uttering of the sentence itself is, or is a part of, the doing of an action. (Austin 5). That is, the performative utterance is not strictly a statement at all, but an *action* in and of itself. Austin gives a few examples of performative utterances:

“I do (sc. take this woman to be my lawful wedded wife)” – as uttered in the course of the marriage ceremony.

“I name this ship the Queen Elizabeth” – as uttered when smashing the bottle against the stem.

“I give and bequeath my watch to my brother” as occurring in a will.

“I bet you sixpence it will rain tomorrow.” (ibid)

In all of these cases, no truth claim is being made and no description being given. None of the above statements are declarations of an intention to perform some act, the statement itself *is* the

act. There must, of course, be certain conditions or circumstances satisfied in order for the performative utterance to be successful, and these are divided into two types. First,

There must exist an accepted conventional procedure having a certain conventional effect, that procedure to include the uttering of certain words by certain persons in certain circumstances, and further the particular persons and circumstances in a given case must be appropriate for the invocation of the particular procedure invoked; the procedure must be executed by all participants both correctly and completely (14-15).

And second,

Where, as often, the procedure is designed for use by persons having certain thoughts or feelings, or for the inauguration of certain consequential conduct on the part of any participant, then a person participating in and so invoking the procedure must in fact have those thoughts or feelings, and the participants must intend so to conduct themselves, and further must actually so conduct themselves subsequently (15).

Austin points out – and this is extremely important to the topic at hand – that if, in making a performative utterance, a person violates any of the rules of the first category, the action fails to be performed; for example, if a person makes a performative utterance to marry another person, but he is married already to someone else, in a country where bigamy is prohibited the action (of marrying a second person) simply does not occur, no marriage is instated whether or not any of

the participants are actually aware of its invalidity (what Austin refers to as a “misfire” (16)). However, if a performative utterance violates the rules of the second category, the action *is* performed, although it constitutes a sort of fraud (what Austin refers to as an “abuse” (ibid)), as in, for instance, the case of a promise made in bad faith – the force of the promise is in effect whether or not the promiser *intended* to keep it, and someone who breaks a promise has committed an immoral act; a promise not kept is a promise broken, and we would not accept as an excuse that the promiser didn't actually mean it. “Accuracy and morality alike are on the side of the plain saying that *our word is our bond.*” (10)

Now, it would seem as if the creation of a work of fiction entirely qualifies, according to Austin's description, as a sort of performative utterance: it is certainly a variety of linguistic activity, it does not attempt to describe or make a claim to any actual state of affairs in the world and does not even need to resemble anything that actually exists in the world at all, does not have any truth-value, but does itself represent the commission of an action: namely, the very production of a work of art. This, then, is where we may enter into a discussion about how to determine an ethics of fiction; according to Austin's first set of conditions for committing a speech-act it would be hard to see how, say, a novelist could be in violation of them, rendering the novel “invalid” in the sense that a marriage might be. With the second set of conditions, however, we can easily see how the conditions might be violated, thus producing an “abusive” work, an unethical work – if the act of writing fiction is, to repeat, “designed for use having certain thoughts or feelings, or for the inauguration of certain consequential conduct on the part of any participant, then a person participating in and so invoking the procedure must in fact have those thoughts or feelings, and the participants must intend so to conduct themselves, and further

must actually so conduct themselves subsequently.” Thus if we determine what the necessary thoughts and feelings of a writer of fiction must be, what intentions and conduct are required by a fiction writer, we will have discovered a method for laying out a structure for a theory of the ethics of authorship for fiction.

The Eternal Origin and the Work Function of Forms

This is the eternal origin of art that a human being confronts a form that wants to become a work through him. Not a figment of his soul but something that appears to the soul and demands the soul's creative power. What is required is a deed that a man does with his whole being: if he commits it and speaks with his being the basic word to the form that appears, then the creative power is released and the work comes into being. (Buber 60)

The preceding quote is from *I and Thou*, a work of philosophy written by the Jewish-Austrian theistic-existentialist philosopher Martin Buber in 1923, and lays the groundwork for the entire question of the ethics of authorship in narrative fiction (and in fact, art in general, though we will limit our inquiry to fiction). Now the language issue is important to address as part of the context of this piece; as the excerpt is a translation (originally written in German, translated into English by Walter Kaufmann, the Jewish German-American philosopher, poet and translator), obviously its meaning (both denotative and connotative) is not going to be absolutely identical to Buber's original, and if we are going to attempt to analyze it we must be aware of that. However, in his translator's notes, Kaufmann explains that, first of all, he had known and been close with Martin Buber, and that in fact Buber's son was the one who contacted Kaufmann and requested that he work on a new English translation (Buber 2). Kaufmann insisted that a straight translation from German to English would be useless, as the many puns and neologisms of Buber's original were untranslatable and would inevitably be lost; a translation with notes and a glossary would be

required in order to retain the full meaning without compromising for ease of reading by an English-language audience. Given that Buber and Kaufmann were contemporaries, both German-speakers, and that Buber's son was happy with the quality of the translation, we must assume that Kaufmann's translation is as accurate as possible and conveys the full original meaning of the text; furthermore, the fact that this excerpt in particular has no special annotations indicates that it was not a particularly difficult passage and seems to convey its plain meaning easily.

I and Thou is a serious work of philosophy, and Buber intends in this excerpt in particular to describe the process of creating a work of art – this is representational speech, Buber is attempting to convince the reader to adopt his (Buber's) view on the subject of artistic creativity and the metaphysical actions that take place when a work of art is created by a human being. The declarative statement, “This is the eternal origin of art” indicates this strongly; Buber does not say that what follows is his own opinion on the origin of art or one of many possible descriptions of it – *this*, he asserts, is *what it is*, objectively, and furthermore that it is “eternal,” that it transcends all cultural, social and historical boundaries, that it is universally true for any and all possible works of art created by any human being anywhere, ever.

Buber continues, “that a human being confronts a form that wants to become a work through him.” We should not infer that Buber intends to say that an artist must be male by the use of the male pronoun here; at the time of the writing and translation of this work, gender-neutral pronouns were not yet commonplace when referring to a hypothetical person – that said, Buber does assert that a work of art can only come about through the actions of a human being, not, say, an animal or inanimate object, which may seem a trivial distinction but in fact is not, as further

illustrated in the following sentence. The artist “confronts” – encounters or meets with something that seemingly already exists in some state – “a form” – this seems most obviously to refer to a *form* in the Platonic sense of an independent abstract entity or object of which any particular physical example is only an instance or copy – “that wants to become a work through him” – here the form is personified, psychologized, it *wants* to become a work, that is, it actually has a desire of its own to become a *work*, to be in some sense born into corporeality and has chosen the artist as a vehicle or conduit for this transformation. There is no indication here that Buber intends this to be taken metaphorically; the reader is to understand that the artist and the form are entering into a genuine interpersonal relationship, a meeting of equals. The form is somehow alive, non-physical or metaphysical or merely pre-physical, and has its own *conscious intentionality* which is directed toward the artist.

“Not a figment of his soul” – here is where Buber indirectly gives a definition of a human being; the implication is that an artist, who previously has been described as a human being, has a soul. He does not give a definition for the “soul,” but it is assumed that the reader will have some idea as to what a soul is – as, indeed, we do. Whether we believe in the literal existence of the metaphysical soul or not, we know what one is supposed to be. The *form* confronts the *soul* on equal ground, that is, in the spiritual realm. But the form is *not* a “figment,” that is, not imaginary, not something that the soul has dreamt up on its own out of nothing, “but something that appears to the soul and demands the soul’s creative power.” The soul is something that has creative power inherent in it, which the form must utilize if it wants to incarnate, but again, the form even at this point has an independent existence.

“What is required is a deed that a man does with his whole being: if he commits it and speaks

with his being the basic word to the form that appears” – the artist must use *his whole being*, which must refer to both the soul and the body, as otherwise Buber would have used one or the other term – the artist uses his whole being to *speak to* the form, he must reciprocally address the form on the equal terms that the form has initiated, must enter into an interpersonal relationship with the form. But note Buber's use of the word “if” here; this relationship is not *compelled*, the artist has to consent to enter into this relationship or the process cannot be completed, it is fully contingent on an understanding of mutuality. The “basic word” is the I-You word-pair that Buber earlier describes as the most fundamental factor in the possibility of true interpersonal relationships, where both parties involved regard each other as persons (in Kantian terms, as “ends-in-themselves”) rather than as objects (or “means to an end”); the artist, in order to create a work of art from a form, must “speak to” the form with the “basic word,” that is, commune with the form *as a person*, as a being that is capable of entering into a true interpersonal relationship, not as an outgrowth of oneself or a some kind of tool – “then the creative power is released and the work comes into being.” Implicit in this: otherwise, it does not come into being. Why not? Because just as it is immoral in Buber's system to engage in an I-It relation with another human being rather than an I-You relation (to treat a human being as an object rather than a person), it is apparently similarly immoral to engage in an I-It relation with a form that wants to become a work – only an I-You relation will suffice; presumably a work that has come into being through the artist speaking only the I-It word-pair will emerge somehow incomplete.

The direct declarative purpose of the excerpt is obviously that Buber is trying to impart information here that he believes to be objectively true; but there is also the indirect meaning,

which is actually a much more complicated declarative statement: Buber is asserting that he has the authority to explain that this is the way the creative process works because he himself has been the human being who has confronted a form that wanted to become a work through him, he has gained this knowledge through direct experience, and he is also willing to stake his authority on the assumption that a reader who is also an artist will find that his or her experience agrees with Buber's description.

As, indeed, the creative process has been described numerous times by writers throughout history; and this is a vital key – perhaps the *most* vital key – to understanding the nature of the ethics of authorship in narrative fiction.

Pioneering psychologist C.G. Jung was also extremely interested in the origins of art, writing extensively on the subject, and in extremely similar tones to those used by Buber. When Jung discusses the origins of art, he speaks of the phenomenon of artists who describe being "taken over" by their work, where, in the process of creating a work, it is as if they are not in fact creating it themselves but rather just allowing themselves to become a vessel for the work to enter the material world from the world of ideas (or, as Plato would have it, Ideals) through them. How to explain transcendent pieces that seem to be enormously greater than the individual, limited human being that birthed them? The infinitely enduring depth of Shakespeare, for example, or the astounding complexity and insight of the most seminal (or as Jung would say, *archetypal*) work of Modernism: James Joyce's *Ulysses*. Jung describes this effect in the following way:

The unborn work in the psyche of the artist is a force of nature that achieves its end either with tyrannical might or with the subtle cunning of nature herself, quite regardless of the personal fate of the man who is its vehicle... We would do well, therefore, to think of the creative process as a living thing implanted in the human psyche. In the language of analytical psychology this living thing is an *autonomous complex*. It is a split-off portion of the psyche, which lives a life of its own outside the hierarchy of consciousness (Jung 75).

Here Jung refers to the sort of fugue state described by many artists when they enter into a period of creativity, where it seems as if something of the noumenal world reaches up and takes hold of the artist's mind – colonizes it, as it were. Jung makes this more explicit when he says that “the work of art...has its source not in the *personal unconscious* of the poet, but in a sphere of unconscious mythology whose primordial images are the common heritage of all mankind. I have called this sphere the *collective unconscious*” (Jung 80). Jung's Collective Unconscious is a transpersonal, immaterial dimension whence all individual minds emerge, but never emerge completely, always remaining implanted by their roots in the invisible underlying order that connects us all, “a door that opens upon the human world from a world beyond, allowing unknown and mysterious powers to act upon man and carry him on the wings of the night to more than a personal destiny” (Jung 95). Indeed, the Collective Unconscious, or something like it, seems to connect *everything*, if we are to locate it within the theory Jung provides for the baffling phenomenon of *synchronicity*, where events or patterns that appear not random but meaningful “manifest themselves in relative simultaneousness in different places and in a parallelism which cannot be explained” (Tarnas 57, quoting Jung), which seems effectively

identical to the concept of the *zeitgeist* with which Cultural Studies is very familiar.

Novelist Milan Kundera also says the very same thing. He quotes the poet Jan Skacel:

Poets don't invent poems

The poem is somewhere behind

It's been there for a long long time

The poet merely discovers it.

Kundera goes on to explain that “for the poet, then, writing means breaking through a wall behind which something immutable ('the poem') lies hidden in darkness” (Kundera 115). This includes narrative fiction as well as poetry, as for Kundera the two art forms are of a single kind. When discussing the strange coincidence that all of his novels unintentionally emerged divided into seven parts each, Kundera insists that this represents “a deep, unconscious, incomprehensible drive, an archetype of form that I cannot escape” (Kundera 86), using both Jung's term “archetype” in its original sense as well as evoking “form” both in the sense of a narrative structure as well as in the Platonic sense previously invoked by Buber.

Buber was steeped in the religious teachings of Judaism as well as the philosophy of theistic writers such as Kant and Kierkegaard, plus atheistic ones such as Nietzsche, and he expects the reader to have at least a basic understanding of the concepts and forms of continental philosophy as well as both Eastern religion and the Abrahamic tradition. Perhaps most importantly, Buber clearly does not subscribe to reductivist materialism, and spends no time justifying this, taking it instead as a basic assumption; a reader must be at least willing to entertain the idea of a

metaphysical reality and a transcendental God in order to make sense of Buber. Similarly, while initially describing the Collective Unconscious as a structure common to all human minds, later in Jung's work he seems to express a more mystical idea of it as being “collective” in that it literally permeates human minds in a transpersonal, practically telepathic sort of way.

But lest we bristle at the metaphysical implications of all this – that is to say, the seemingly mystical idea that art somehow pre-exists in some non-physical plane and only becomes solidified through the actions of the artist's soul – we needn't necessarily worry. Though it is true that the writers quoted above *do* mean this literally, it is not absolutely required that one discard physicalism in order to accept these arguments if this is a concept that for some reason offends us. Theorists in the emerging field of Cognitive Narratology (the study of the relationship between the human mind and the persistent habit of storytelling among all known cultures) stress that it is possible to discuss the issues in these terms while remaining functionalists, if we so wish, with regard to the actual nature of consciousness; to that end it is instructive to include the following extended quote:

Only in the case of actual human beings can cognitive-science concepts, models, and claims apply quite literally, and that only with respect to them can claims couched in cognitivist terms be empirically tested, be it directly or indirectly. On all other levels we are operating within the confines of a make-believe world, pretending that narrators and storyworld participants exist independently of the text which actually creates via semiotic means, and that they are sufficiently human-like so that concepts developed in cognitive science to model the activities of actual minds are applicable to them, even if only

through analogical transfer...what is illuminating or insightful is culturally negotiated and consensual rather than independently and constantly defined. But this is equally true about the application of *any* representational kind of vocabulary to semiotically generated domains and their denizens. In short, as soon as we are ready to apply concepts from action theory to storyworld participants, we should be ready to apply to them concepts and models concerning [cognitive mental functioning]. By the same token, once we are ready to ascribe actions to fictional storyworld participants, we should be ready to ascribe them minds, and especially cognitive activities. A refusal to do so in the name of philosophical purism runs counter to every single readerly experience and deprives narratology of the ability to handle a major component of all storyworlds, essential for making sense of any action sequence. (Margolin in Herman 273-4)

The degree to which this preceding passage is a preemptive rationalization on Margolin's part is debatable; regardless, issues of this kind do not *require* us to accept what at least Buber and Jung, and apparently Kundera (who, it should be noted, warns us against taking his descriptions as “some superstitious flirtation,” though he also denies that they represent “any rational calculation” either (Kundera 86)) consider to be literal descriptions of the creative process as actually literal – though, of course, we are also free to take these writers at face value as well if we prefer.

At any rate, there are some differences in terminology and phraseology between the descriptions of Buber, Jung, and Kundera, but there are also astounding similarities: all three agree that art is not something actually *created* by the artist, but merely a kind of Platonic form

channelled through the artist into a work (“a thing made to last, to connect the past with the future,” (Kundera 19)); at best the artist is the medium used by the art to become manifest. If we accept this, it immediately suggests the question: how, then, can an artist have any moral responsibility for his or her art? If in some sense the artist has nothing to do with the content of what he or she produces, then wouldn't he or she be just as responsible for an “immoral” work as an inanimate television set is for a degrading program? This sort of a view is promoted (though in quite different terms, as will be shown) for example, by theorist Roland Barthes in his formulation of the concept of the Death of the Author; we will see, however, that it is not as simple as Barthes would have it be.

Intentional Fallacies and the Meaning of Meaning

The key concepts that will move the argument forward are *intention* and *meaning*, and it is very important to disambiguate the terms because each of them can have multiple applications and we must take care not to equivocate in their use; that said, it will also be shown that in a real sense the multiple separate uses of these terms are intimately related and it is this relation that will reveal much of why and how an ethics of narrative fiction can be achieved.

First, the related terms *intention* and *intentionality*. An intention is the goal or end of an agent's performance of an act; this is the sense of the word used in the phrase "intentional fallacy," which will be discussed shortly. Intentionality is the quality of being representational of something, or of possessing *aboutness*; this is the sense in which Dennett uses the term in describing the "Intentional Stance," which will also become relevant for our purposes.

Now, Barthes, in his essay *The Death of the Author*, promotes a formulation of the intentional fallacy *qua* fallacy; the intentional fallacy is the position of interpreting the meaning of a work of art on the basis of the artist's intention in creating it. Barthes holds that any text is not an original creation

of its author, but rather a mere reorganization of pre-existing components, and thus any possible meaning cannot be found in the intention of the author – or, as Barthes would have it, the *scriptor* – and it is only in the reader where this multiplicity of sources converge into a unity; therefore, it is the reader and not the author who creates the meaning, who, in essence, "writes,"

the text: “We know now that a text is not a line of words releasing a single ‘theological’ meaning (the ‘message’ of the Author-God) but a multi-dimensional space in which a variety of writings, none of them original, blend and clash,” (Barthes 146), and,

In the multiplicity of writing, everything is to be disentangled, nothing deciphered; the structure can be followed, 'run' (like the thread of a stocking) at every point and at every level, but there is nothing beneath: the space of writing is to be ranged over, not pierced; writing ceaselessly posits meaning ceaselessly to evaporate it, carrying out a systematic exemption of meaning. In precisely this way literature (it would be better from now on to say writing), by refusing to assign a “secret,” an ultimate meaning, to the text (and to the world as text), liberates what may be called an anti-theological activity, an activity that is truly revolutionary since to refuse to fix meaning is, in the end, to refuse God and his hypostases - reason, science, law. (147)

This is Barthes's ultimate rejection of the concept of artistic meaning, in his pursuit of rejecting *all* meanings, in the sense of world-as-text, a dismissal of the Grand Narrative previously seen to have held civilization's semiotic systems together (i.e., God), and this position still informs critical and philosophical thought today, in the form of “reader response theory” and the like. It is certain that if an author has no control over the the work that he writes (or “scripts”), then he cannot possibly be held responsible for anything about it in a moral sense; that is, if the Author is Dead, there can be no ethics of authorship for fiction. Very curiously, though, much like Lacan, Barthes sows the seeds of his own destruction in this essay when he explicitly

refers to writing as a form of performative speech:

The fact is (or, it follows) that writing can no longer designate an operation of recording, notation, representation, “depiction” (as the Classics would say); rather, it designates exactly what linguists, referring to Oxford philosophy, call a performative, a rare verbal form (exclusively given in the first person and in the present tense) in which the enunciation has no other content (contains no other proposition) than the act by which it is uttered—something like the I declare of kings or the I sing of very ancient poets. (145)

Much like Lacan, who used language to communicate the failure of language as a tool for communication, Barthes authors an essay declaring the Death of the Author – notably using phraseology such as “We now know that” and “The fact is” while dismissing the very notions of knowledge and facts. Even if we forgive this contradiction, Barthes’s mischaracterizes the nature of the performative; it is not the case that the performative utterance contains no other proposition than “the act by which it is uttered,” but it is the utterance itself that constitutes its own action, that is, the propositional content of the utterance is the *act performed* by the utterance, not the utterance itself; the performative utterance has no truth conditions, unlike the way in which Barthes describes it, as if it were a matter of the utterance entailing the propositional content of another utterance, such as “snow is white” implying by logical necessity the propositional content of “I believe that snow is white” (see Davidson 209). Regardless of whether this mischaracterization on Barthes’s part is deliberate, even in his own description of writing as performative utterance he writes,

Having buried the Author, the modern sriptor can thus no longer believe, as according to the pathetic view of his predecessors, that this hand is too slow for his thought or passion and that consequently, making a law of necessity, he must emphasize this delay and indefinitely 'polish' his form. For him, on the contrary, the hand, cut off from any voice, borne by a pure gesture of inscription (and not of expression), traces a field without origin - or which, at least, hap no other origin than language itself, language which ceaselessly calls into question all origins. (Barthes 146)

Note Barthes's assumption here: that in seemingly removing the authority of the author, he has rendered the text originless, or that, at best, having its origin in language, an origin that “calls into question all origins” is the same as having no origin at all. This absolutely does not follow. In fact, nearly the opposite is true: in attributing, as Barthes even admits is possible, the origin of a text to language we *reinforce* its origin – calling an origin into question is not the same as eliminating it, and to the extent that language is independent of any individual mind (which is what, to Barthes, exonerates the Author from responsibility for the text), language is also intimately tied up with consciousness (Wittgenstein and Cognitive Narratology would say that language is a major factor, if not *the* major factor, in *determining* consciousness), and consequently authorial *intent* (or at the very least the act of performativity, what Barthes derisively refers to as “scripting,” in which intent is not only inherent but, as Austin shows, a necessary component) is profoundly related to the *intentionality* of a text: the extent to which a text carries propositional attitudes, the extent to which it symbolically refers to things, to which it

has *aboutness*, is a direct and ineluctable product of its nature as a *form that becomes a work*. We find no comfort in Barthes's insistence on the primacy of the reader (or, as it were, "observer") over author (or "speaker") for the simple reason that the coherency of the entire concept of propositional attitudes depends upon the objectivity of truth and meaning, they are "identified, directly and indirectly, by their causes" (Davidson 153). Communication is inherently intersubjective; causeless communication is a nonsensical concept for the same reason that Wittgenstein proscribes the existence of a "private language" – a precondition for the existence of communication, as we have seen, is that it has to conform to determinate semiotic rules (Wittgenstein in Davidson 116), that it be mutually interpretable by speaker and listener. So how could there exist a language where speaker and listener, or transmitter and receiver, are the same, or, worse, a communication where there is no transmitter and only a receiver? How can one receive a message that has not been transmitted? Under Barthes, we are forced to conclude that either a text is not a communication, in which case it is necessarily meaningless (in the same way that randomly falling tree branches might happen to spell out a sentence, but without an *intention* on the part of the tree or some agent controlling the branches, the "sentence" is not a message), or it *is* a communication, in which case the meaning has to inhere objectively merely according to the laws of communication, if not its very definition. Intention and intentionality are fused, in that it must be the communicating agent's purpose that his utterance contain propositional content, otherwise no communication can occur; "meaning" cannot be found in noncommunicational utterances, nonintersubjective messages, or originless texts – in fact all three of these terms are self-contradicting.

While it is true that communication in many cases may be imperfect, this does not present an

irresolvable conflict with regard to authorship. As Davidson points out, “Because there are many different but equally acceptable ways of interpreting an agent we may say, if we please, that interpretation or translation is indeterminate, or that there is no fact of the matter as to what someone means by his or her words. In the same vein, we could speak of the indeterminacy of weight or temperature. But we normally accentuate the positive by being clear about what is invariant from one assignment of numbers to another, for it is what is invariant that is empirically significant. The invariant *is* the fact of the matter. We can afford to look at translation and the content of mental states in the same light” (Davidson 215).

King presents the same view, specifically in terms of writing-as-telepathy: “Do we see the same thing? We'd have to get together and compare notes to make absolutely sure, but I think we do. There will be necessary variations, of course...but does it really matter?” (King 105-6)

This is also where the potential equivocation on the word “meaning” comes into focus as well, which is important to consider going forward. Terry Eagleton, in his book *The Meaning of Life*, emphasizes the distinction between the two senses of the word: “It is important to distinguish between meaning as a given signification and meaning as an act which intends to signify something” (Eagleton 59), that is, that there is a difference between the sense in which a sentence means what its speaker intends to communicate to its listener and the sense in which, say, the presence of cumulonimbus clouds means that it is probably going to rain. Eagleton is saying here that while both senses of “meaning” require semiotic reference (i.e., having intentionality), only one of them needs to have been initiated by a conscious agent (i.e., being intentional). Barthes could use this as a way out of his conundrum: he could say that the meaning of a text is more akin to the meaning of a dark cloud than the meaning of a sentence and

thus does not require the presence of a conscious agent – the Author as “Blind Watchmaker,” so to speak. Unfortunately for Barthes, this does not hold up to close scrutiny. First of all, the semiotic reference of a dark cloud is not subjective simply because it is unintended; we are not free to interpret the presence of dark clouds however we wish. Its meaning is objective and fixed; indeed, it is not only causally determined but *physically deterministic* – it is the very immutable nature of the universe that imminent precipitation be prefigured by the appearance of a certain sort of clouds, which would seem to imply an even stricter rule of interpretation than the most author-centric critic would affirm. The other point is that there is a framework by which the presence of *any* system that exhibits behaviour that seems to contain semiotic content can be considered intentional in the “having beliefs and desires” sense. Daniel Dennett refers to these as “intentional systems,” and calls the position of relying on ascriptions to the system of beliefs and desires (and other apparently mental phenomena) to explain and predict its behaviour as “the intentional stance” (Dennett in Cooney 290).

Dennett describes the intentional stance in terms of two other possible attitudes – the “design stance,” in which “we make predictions solely from knowledge or assumptions about the system's functional design, irrespective of the physical constitution or condition of the innards of the particular object” (291), and the “physical stance,” from which “our predictions are based on the actual physical state of the particular object, and are worked out by applying whatever knowledge we have of the laws of nature” (ibid). This being a functionalist (as opposed to, say, a dualist) description, Dennett is only providing a theory of behaviour; as an eliminative materialist, Dennett is only suggesting that it is helpful for us to describe certain systems as intentional in order for us to explain and predict its behaviour. In the same way that medicine

treats the human body from the perspective of the design stance whether or not the individual doctor personally believes that the human body was literally designed, Dennett does not mean to imply that, for example, a chess-playing computer “really” has intentionality, that is, has beliefs and desires (“knows” the rules of chess, “wants” to win the game, etc), but only that it is most efficient for us to act as though the computer has these intentional states if we wish to understand and predict its behaviour, given that even if (as Dennett, as a functionalist, would profess) intentionality is reducible to design, which is itself reducible to the physical, in the absence of an understanding of the design of the computer and the physical characteristics and laws that actually, deterministically, produce its behaviour, it is most useful for our purposes to attribute to it intentionality.

In terms of a theory of communication, Dennett asserts quite explicitly that a result of this formulation is that “any time a theory builder proposes to call any event, state, structure, etc., in any system (say the brain of an organism) a *signal* or *message* or *command* (or otherwise endows it with content) he *takes out a loan* of intelligence. He implicitly posits along with his signals, messages, or commands, something that can serve as a *signal-reader*, *message understander*, or *commander* (else his “signals” will be for naught, will decay unreceived, uncomprehended” (297); it is precisely this loan of intelligence that Barthes would deny in his denial of the meaning of a text.

The discomfort we may feel attributing intentionality to systems that are, intuitively, not conscious, Dennett dismisses easily from his functionalist perspective; to him, we only attribute intentionality to humans as a result of insufficient physical information as to the determination of behaviour; if we knew all the physical components and laws involved in a person's behaviour,

Dennett holds, we would just as easily have a theory of behaviour for humans – but lacking that knowledge, we automatically fall back to the design stance, then to the intentional stance, not because it is actually true but because it works. Those who are not eliminative materialists need not adopt Dennett's position in order to see the practicality of sometimes employing the intentional stance for non-human agents that exhibit seemingly rational behaviour. This is the same explanation previously given by Margolin “about the application of *any* representational kind of vocabulary to semiotically generated domains and their denizens.”

What we are approaching is seemingly the very opposite pole to that expressed by Buber, Kundera and Jung, all of whom seem to make a claim for an view of the text as an intentional system with literally its own propositional attitudes – its own *meaning* and its own *desires* (namely, the desire to “become a work”), that is to say, its own *mind*. As we have determined that the text is a speech-act, and that its violation under the second set of Austin's terms would constitute an “abuse,” we must now determine who the participants in the communication are, in order to come to a theory of the ethics of fiction. One would at first immediately tend to assume that the participants would be the writer and the reader or readers. That would follow in the case of texts that make a truth-claim (such as non-fiction), or one which makes a specific promise to the audience – but fiction does neither of these things. This is why no one gets outraged at a writer who writes an autobiography as fiction, but the audience does rebel when a writer confabulates an alleged memoir. Readers may become angry if a particular novel is of low quality, but this is not because of any particularly immoral act on the writer's part. Since this is the case, it would appear that no ethics of fiction is required or even possible – until we re-examine Buber's description of the act of bringing a work of art into existence: “What is required

is a deed that a man does with his whole being: if he commits it and speaks with his being the basic word to the form that appears, then the creative power is released and the work comes into being.”

The writer must *speak with his being the basic word to the form that appears*. The form of linguistic activity involved here is not merely the organization of sentences to compose a text; the speech-act performed is, in fact, a communication between the writer and the *text itself*, the result of which being that the text is transmuted from form into work. If the intentionality possessed by the text is only an abstraction, a convenient metaphor, as Dennett would have it, it would be difficult to argue that this entails any ethical obligation on the part of the writer. Most people, probably, would be unwilling either to attribute an actual conscious mind to a text that technically does not even physically exist before it is written, before it becomes a work, though the “behaviour” of this semiotically-determined domain – its propositional content – would appear to fall quite within the boundaries of rational intentionality. There is, however, a sort of middle-ground that nicely resolves this conundrum.

David Chalmers notes the division of psychology and phenomenology in the apprehension of information states: psychology is essentially behavioural, whereas phenomenology is essentially experiential. That is to say that the sense in which Dennett can describe a chess-playing computer as having beliefs and desires (and intentionality in general) is a basically *psychological* description in that it is an explanation in functional terms, whereas the reason that we intuitively want not to attribute the possession of propositional attitudes to non-living systems is that there seems to be no space for, and no evidence of, the presence of *consciousness* in such a system. But these, points out Chalmers, are two different things that needn't always both be present. A

system may have psychology, as it were, without phenomenology in how it resolves the information states associated with it. It is an uncontroversial claim that all sorts of systems resolve information states. Whether or not such systems can thus be assigned propositional attitudes is what raises suspicions. It does not seem irrational, though, to posit that, while the possession of propositional attitudes is certainly a necessary condition for having a mind, or at least being mindlike, it is not a sufficient condition. There does not appear to be a logical or strictly intuitive conflict here.

Can a pre-written text, a “form that wishes to become a work,” be this sort of a system? Following Buber's concepts this certainly appears to be the case. Buber describes three spheres in which the world of relation arises: our life with nature, our life with men, and our life with “spiritual beings,” or, as translated by Ronald Gregor Smith, “intelligible forms,” and in all three of these spheres we may interact in two different ways – with an I-It relation, where we regard our interaction as with an object, and an I-You relation, where we regard our interaction as with a subject. These relational operations are what Buber calls the “basic words,” though they need not necessarily be verbally spoken, though of course they frequently are – Buber simply means that the nature of all our interactions with the world is fundamentally linguistic (as Davidson has also shown). With regard to the sphere of our life with intelligible forms, Buber tells us “here the relation is wrapped in a cloud but reveals itself, it lacks but creates language. We hear no You and yet feel addressed; we answer – creating, thinking, acting: with our being we speak the basic word, unable to say You with our mouth” (Buber 57). This is precisely the relation as described in his passage on the eternal origin of art. He describes the varieties of interrelations by giving the example of a tree:

[I]f will and grace are joined [it can occur], that as I contemplate the tree I am drawn into a relation, and the tree ceases to be an It. The power of exclusiveness has seized me.

This does not require me to forego any of the modes of contemplation. There is nothing that I must not see in order to see, and there is no knowledge that I must forget. Rather is everything, picture and movement, species and instance, law and number included and inseparably fused. Whatever belongs to the tree is included: its form and its mechanics, its colours and its chemistry, its conversation with the elements and its conversation with the stars – all this in its entirety. The tree is no impression, no play of my imagination, no aspect of a mood; it confronts me bodily and has to deal with me as I must deal with it – only differently. One should not try to dilute the meaning of the relation: relation is reciprocity. (Buber 58)

This is stunningly similar to, if more poetic than, Dennett's three attitudes (of the physical, design, and intentional stances) and the two descriptions are directly isomorphic to one another. Buber also explicitly addresses the question of consciousness with regard to the entering into of an I-You relation with the hypothetical tree: "Does the tree then have consciousness, similar to our own? I have no experience of that. But thinking that you have brought this off in your own case, must you again divide the indivisible? What I encounter is neither the soul of a tree nor a dryad, but the tree itself" (59).

It is precisely in this way that the author interacts with the text in the act of producing it: as with an intelligible form or spiritual being, in Buber's words; an archetype of the collective

unconscious, as Jung would say; an intentional system in the parlance of Dennett, or, as Chalmers describes it, as an *information space*. “An information space is an abstract space consisting of a number of states, which I will call *information states*, and a basic structure of *difference relations* between those states” (Chalmers 280), and this is perhaps the best, most precise sense in which we can understand the nature of the relation between author and text as a process:

Information spaces are *abstract* spaces, and information states are abstract states. They are not part of the concrete physical or phenomenal world. But we can find information in both the physical and phenomenal world, if we look at things the right way...It seems intuitively clear that information spaces and states are realized throughout the physical world. We can see my light switch as realizing a two-state information space, for example, with its states 'up' and 'down' realizing the two states. Or we can see a compact disk as realizing a combinatorial information state, consisting in a complex structure of bits. One can see information realized in a thermostat, *a book*, or a telephone line in similar ways. (Chalmers 281, emphasis mine)

And so we achieve through this a new understanding of Buber's personification of the process of artistic creation that agrees with all of those writers and theorists whose interpretations have been shown to be logically consistent and plausible, which resolves all these issues into one: it is the act by which a human being uses a performative utterance as an intersubjective agent on behalf of an abstract information space, where at least one of its associated propositional

attitudes is that it become physically realized.

At last we have the terms whereby a theory of the ethics of fiction can come to be formulated.

The Ethical Utterance and the Resurrection of the Author

While research on the ethics of performative utterances is relatively scarce, there is much work that has been done on the margins of the issue, as it were, from which we may draw.

Kundera provides us with a strong hint in this direction:

The sole *raison d'être* of a novel is to discover what only the novel can discover. A novel that does not discover a hitherto unknown segment of existence is immoral. Knowledge is the novel's only morality. (Kundera 5-6)

So for Kundera, the moral work of fiction must “discover a hitherto unknown segment of existence.” This would seem to be in opposition to the idea of fiction as speech-act, though, in that the speech-act by its definition has no truth-value, and “existence” would appear to mean a segment of reality, which is to say, truthful claims. Kundera fortunately elaborates later on, explaining

A novel examines not reality but existence. And existence is not what has occurred, existence is the realm of human possibilities, everything that man can become, everything he's capable of. Novelists draw up the *map of existence* by discovering this or that human possibility. But again, to exist means “being-in-the-world.” Thus the character and his world must both be understood as possibilities. (Kundera 42-3)

This is much more clear, and also accords quite well with descriptions of the origins of art given by the other writers and theorists we have encountered. The distinction drawn here between reality and existence is in essence the same distinction that Buber makes between art as a *work* and art as a *form*: the work of art is a part of reality; the form is a piece of existence. Kundera's "existence" would be, to Jung, the Collective Unconscious, which is precisely the dwelling place of archetypes – those eternal forms that precede representation but consist in the very possibilities of everything a human being is capable of; hence they exist across all human minds and persist throughout time and culture. Once again we see that Buber, Jung and Kundera are all speaking of the same thing here. What sort of morality, then, can be applicable to the act of "drawing up the map of existence"?

Broadly, moral systems can be divided into consequentialist or utilitarian theories, and deontological theories. The former was formulated most famously by John Stuart Mill (in *Utilitarianism*), and perhaps its most prominent contemporary proponent is Peter Singer (in *Practical Ethics* and others). The latter was most strongly promoted and logically argued by Immanuel Kant (in *Groundwork for the Metaphysics of Morals*). We will take a look at these two positions to discover which would be the appropriate framework for formulating an ethics of fiction in the terms we have set out.

Utilitarianism is what we seem to be adopting when our initial sense is that the writer of fiction should have no responsibility to the audience as such, except perhaps the responsibility to tell a good story. This does not strike us intuitively as being a moral responsibility, but let us take a look at the details of utilitarianism and perhaps we will discover something unexpected. Mill

proposes his moral theory as “the creed which accepts as the foundation of morals 'utility' or 'the greatest happiness principle' holds that actions are right in proportion as they tend to promote happiness; wrong as they tend to produce the reverse of happiness. By happiness is intended pleasure and the absence of pain; by unhappiness, pain and the privation of pleasure” (Mill in Cahn 893). Applied to works of art (or the act of producing a work of art) following this line requires us to make certain deductions. Most obviously, it would seem to imply that the more popular a work is, the morally better it is. At the risk of being glib, this is clearly ridiculous; a glance at the bestseller list or a month working at a bookstore should be enough to prove that popular works are superior in no way to unpopular or obscure works, certainly not morally. Worse, it implies that the attitude of a writer should be primarily to create the most commercially popular work he can without regard to actual content (as no matter how much happiness a writer may get from writing a novel that satisfies him on its own merits it cannot compete with the amount of happiness millions of readers may get from a cliché potboiler, and intuitively this seems absurd. There doesn't appear to be any way to countenance the idea that, say, Dan Brown is a more “moral” writer than Marcel Proust was. In fact we would have to conclude that a writer who writes in order to satisfy himself even at the risk of alienating potential readers must be regarded as *immoral* according to this theory. Yet the attitude of the writer would seem to have to be a major part of the essential morality of the production of any work (as we have already dispensed with reader-based models such as Barthes's).

The ethics of language and speech in particular seem intuitively incompatible with a utilitarian framework. It would entail a sort of “what they don't know can't hurt them” model, and would dictate the sort of behaviour that we consider reprehensible, such as lying to a large

number of people in order to make them happy being moral, whereas relating painful truths would be immoral, or breaking promises when the potential results would be unpleasant. These exact sorts of act are commonly regarded as some of the most shameful behaviours of, for example, politicians. And James Frey would have been perfectly in the right to have invented his “memoir” out of whole cloth and passed it off as truth, if we are judging only by the amount of happiness created by an act and the amount of pain avoided – we would be forced to accept an explanation of “I didn't think anyone would find out” and find Frey blameless for his deception. It is perhaps not surprising that utilitarianism should be found lacking when looking for an ethics of authorship for fiction; this is the same idea that led philosopher Peter Singer to conclude, in his *Practical Ethics* and *Animal Rights*, among others, that it would be more moral to kill a developmentally-delayed or brain-damaged human, or indeed a perfectly normal and healthy but unwanted human infant, than, say, a chimpanzee, because the chimp's capacity for pleasure and pain is arguably greater than that of these human examples and so is more worthy of moral consideration. This idea seems to make the title *Practical Ethics* chillingly ironic. Utilitarianism can also be used to justify genocide of a minority group hated by the majority (as the elimination of the minority would give the majority great pleasure, and the pain of the minority would be small in comparison simply based on their numbers), slavery, or the so-called “tyranny of the majority” in general.

Does a deontological framework present a better option? Immanuel Kant introduces his proposal of a moral philosophy based in reason (as opposed to utilitarianism's appeal to emotion) with the assertion that

There is no possibility of thinking of anything at all in the world, or even out of it, which can be regarded as good without qualification, except *a good will*. Intelligence, wit, judgment, and whatever talents of the mind one may want to name are doubtless in many respects good and desirable, as are such qualities of temperament as courage, resolution, perseverance. But they can also become extremely bad and harmful if the will, which is to make use of these gifts of nature and which in its special constitution is called character, is not good. The same holds with gifts of fortune; power, riches, honour, even health, and that complete well-being and contentment with one's condition which is called happiness make for pride and often hereby even arrogance, unless there is a good will to correct their influence on the mind and herewith also to rectify the whole principle of action and make it universally conformable to its end. The sight of a being who is not graced by any touch of a pure and good will but who yet enjoys an uninterrupted prosperity can never delight a rational and impartial spectator. Thus a good will seems to constitute the indispensable condition of being even worthy of happiness.

(Kant in Cahn 830)

Note Kant's anticipating Mill's position of “happiness as highest good.” Kant shows that happiness cannot be considered an inherent good in and of itself (let alone the basis for establishing what is morally good) and can even itself be the cause of evil if left unchecked, but that there are, in fact, prerequisites for an individual to be *worthy* of happiness. This seems logical. It addresses one half of the “problem of evil” argument against the existence of God – commonly this is formulated as “why do bad things happen to good people,” but the reverse is

equally important: why do *good* things happen to *bad* people? This undeserved happiness bothers us, not because we automatically begrudge others their happiness but because it appears that, rationally, those who operate with a *bad will* ought not to be rewarded for it. Furthermore it seems appropriate that a major component in the determination of the ethics of fiction would be the state of the will of the author. We will return to this point.

The necessity of a good will sets the groundwork for Kant's fundamental moral maxim, namely the Categorical Imperative, which represents “an action as objectively necessary in itself, without reference to another end” (841) – as opposed to a *hypothetical imperative* which is concerned with achieving a certain goal – which is to say that a person who behaves morally is one who does what is *objectively necessary* (viz, his *duty*) as determined by the laws of reason. What this duty is with regard to writing fiction will be returned to, but Kant makes it clear why a good (and free) will is a mandatory component for moral action according to this formula:

Everything in nature works according to laws. Only a rational being has the power to act according to his conception of laws, i.e., according to principles, and thereby he has a will. Since the derivation of actions from laws requires reason, the will is nothing but practical reason. If reason infallibly determines the will, then in the case of such a being actions which are recognized to be objectively necessary are also subjectively necessary, i.e., the will is a faculty of choosing only that which reason, independently of inclination, recognizes as being practically necessary, i.e., good. But if reason of itself does not sufficiently determine the will, and if the will submits also to subjective conditions (certain incentives) which do not always agree with objective conditions; in a word, if

the will does not in itself completely accord with reason (as is actually the case with men), the actions which are recognized as objectively necessary are subjectively contingent, and the determination of such a will according to objective laws is necessitation. That is to say that the relation of objective laws to a will not thoroughly good is represented as the determination of the will of a rational being by principles of reason which the will does not necessarily follow because of its own nature. (840)

In other words, a good will is required because to conform with the categorical imperative is not automatically natural to a human being who is at all times influenced by factors other than pure practical reason – most notably, individual pleasure. This is the difference between a writer who writes purely for the purpose of producing a commercially and popularly successful work, and the writer who writes to “discover a hitherto unknown segment of existence,” in Kundera's words. The former would seem to be immoral because it is driven not according to a principle but in order to derive money and happiness, etc, from the work. The latter is indifferent to these potential effects, acting purely in order to be in accord with the objectively necessary nature of the author's intersubjective relationship with a “form that wants to become a work through him.”

The Categorical Imperative thus has two main practical implications: that one must act in accordance with a principle that one would will to become universally accepted; and that one must interact with other rational beings (beings, that is, who are themselves capable of moral agency, meaning beings equipped with free will) as ends-in-themselves, rather than only a means-to-an-end. This latter principle is precisely the same as Buber's distinction between speaking to another the basic words I-You or I-It. To speak to a person in an I-It is to treat the

other person as an object, that is, a means to an end. The moral way to speak (i.e., interact, communicate, etc.) to another person (rational, moral agent) is with the basic word I-You, acknowledging that he or she is, in fact, a person. Since Buber insists that the act of creating a work of art requires “speaking with one's whole being the basic word to the form that appears,” and we know that it is only the basic word I-You that must be spoken with one's whole being, the obvious consequence is that a writer is required to communicate with, interact with, the form as if it were a rational being – a “spiritual being” to be sure, but a person-like being. Is this reasonable? Does it make any sense to have an ethical obligation to a “form”?

First of all, Kantian language-ethics is not without its problems either. Kant not only implies but explicitly says that lying contravenes the categorical imperative in both formulations: the act of telling someone a lie treats the person as an object, since lying is a form of manipulation, a way of getting what one wants through deception by disregarding the other person's own will; and it is impossible to will that lying or making false promises be a universal principle not just because it is necessarily ends-based, but because “when you tell a lie, you merely take exception to the general rule that says everyone should always tell the truth and believe that what you are saying is true. When you lie, you do not thereby will that everyone else lie and not believe that what you are saying is true, because in such a case your lie would never work to get what you want” (835n23). Lying and promise-breaking degrade the currency of language; if they become common enough, no one will ever take anything that anyone else says to be true, communication becomes impossible, and if, as Kundera holds, communication is existence, *existence itself becomes incoherent*.

This all logically follows, however Kant extends the principle of honesty even to the case of a

person being required to tell the truth to someone who comes knocking on his door asking if such-and-such is inside (and he is), so that the person at the door can come inside and murder him. Strictly adhering to a principle of complete honesty at all times would require that one sell out the friend in his house to the criminal at the door, which seems intuitively immoral. Some neo-Kantian philosophers have attempted to come to grips with this, or explain it as a misformulation of the question. It certainly presents a problem, however, not for our purposes – after all, writing fiction is not quite the same as telling a lie. Fiction is not true in the sense of necessarily according with facts, but it is first of all not meant to be and everyone involved is fully aware of it, and second, good fiction tends to be described as truthful in a much deeper sense; it describes not reality, as Kundera says, but existence. In Kantian terms, reality is contingent – it happens to be this way, but it could just as easily have been some other way – whereas existence, to the extent that it consists in the totality of human possibility, is necessary, because it contains all contingencies. Reality is hypothetical; existence is categorical.

Now, Kant does not directly address the ethics of making art, but he does discuss the capacity for evaluating a work of art in his *Critique of Aesthetic Judgment*, which we can use to derive the criteria by which some aspect of a work can be considered objective, given its necessarily in many ways subjective nature. He divides these criteria into three parts: “The agreeable is what *gratifies* a man; the beautiful what simply *pleases* him; the good what is *esteemed* (approved), i.e., that on which he sets an objective worth” (Kant 2008 pp49). The agreeable, therefore, is purely subjective, a matter of taste, and concerned only with the phenomenal effect on a person – whether the work in question causes him pleasure or displeasure. “The beautiful is that which, apart from a concept, pleases universally” (60), which is to say that whereas a person cannot

argue about what it agreeable to him (because it is inherently personal), he *can* argue about what is beautiful – he should want his idea of the beautiful to be accepted by everyone, to please universally, though of course it cannot, being in its essence aesthetic, that is, empirical and subjective. The *good*, however, is something else entirely – it based on a concept (an ideal) and can be quite apart from the agreeable or the beautiful. It need not appeal to any of the senses, indeed it can be extremely unpleasant and ugly. “It is only judgements upon the good which, while also determining the delight in an object, possess logical and not mere aesthetic universality; for it is as involving a cognition of the object that they are valid of it, and on that account valid for everyone” (56). We derive from this that the good work of art is actually *morally* good and not merely good in some aesthetic sense; it is good insofar as it is a truthful representation of something objectively existent (rather than merely contingently real), a particular instantiation of an archetype or set of archetypes. Kant allows for the fact that there is by no means universal assent on what is “good” by explaining that, unlike in the case of the agreeable or even the beautiful, since subjectivity does not come into the equation with regard to the good, any individual may have a greater or lesser capacity for judgement as to what is good – some people will be better at it than others. Those who cannot tell the difference between a good work and a merely agreeable one, for instance, are simply *wrong* in the same way as someone who cannot discern between a morally correct act and an act that is simply beneficial.

And this is why it is necessary to interact with – *communicate* with – the “form that wants to become a work” as if it were a person. Not because it *is* a person, since obviously it is not. But to the extent that it is an information space, an autonomous entity, it has a psychology, if not a phenomenology. Which is to say that it may not have its own consciousness, its own experiences

and feelings, but it clearly does, and must, have intentionality in the purest sense: it is *about something*. And in that it possesses propositional attitudes (beliefs and desires – most pertinently, the desire to become a work) the author who enters into a relation with a form is therefore ethically bound by an imperative to honour that relation on its own terms categorically: to perform through language the act of transmuting a form in existence to a work in reality by crafting it into a *map of itself*, translating it into signifiers, thus rendering it signified. And this must be done *honestly*, just as we owe our honesty to any rational being not only for its own sake but for the sake of the very concept of language, which is, after all, consciousness-shaped inasmuch as consciousness is language-shaped. Meaning the creative act must be performed with a *good will*.

The degree to which this concept coincides with the idea of “authenticity” in art would seem then to be no accident. Kant's moral philosophy and aesthetic philosophy are tied closely together in the idea of the “good”; and Walter Kaufmann, translator of Buber (among many others) but who also wrote on Jung, spent a great amount of his later work focusing on issues of authenticity and the authentic. Modern philosophy as a whole – particularly existentialists such as Buber – have been especially concerned with authenticity and generally how to live an authentic life, or if such a thing is possible at all given the nature of the inexorable external influences of the world on the self. While the sense in which a life can be authentic is slightly distinct from the sense in which a work of art can be, there are nevertheless major connections and parallels, and if we are to connect the idea of the “moral” work of art with the “authentic,” it is instructive to examine these connections, if briefly.

Walter Benjamin spoke of the “authenticity” of a work of art as an “essence” that contains not

merely the content of the work itself but also everything that is transmissible about it as a physical object, including its entire history from its original creation. With the advent of mechanical reproduction, he contended this “aura” of authenticity held by artworks would disappear, because there was no longer strictly speaking any “original” of which copies were copies – each “copy” is in fact a copy of something that never physically existed in the first place; these sorts of objects are what Jean Baudrillard dubbed *simulacra*. Benjamin held that the dissolution of this aura of authenticity was a positive development, in that it would detach content from object and allow for evaluation and enjoyment of artworks based upon their own merit rather than on their physical history. But the concept of authenticity persists nonetheless; Charles Taylor, paraphrasing Schiller, describes this: “[A]uthenticity...comes to be understood...as its own goal. [A]esthetic wholeness is an independent goal, with its own *telos*, its own form of goodness and satisfaction” (Taylor 64-5). This is a necessary rethinking of Benjamin's concept, because it has become clear that the mechanical reproduction of a work of art does not detract from what we make call its aura – the mode by which it is physically copied is in fact irrelevant to so many of the art forms that came to be during the post-industrial period where mechanical reproduction was a given: particularly film, graphic texts, and video games. But would we describe any of these as being *inherently* devoid of authenticity? As a matter of fact, mechanical reproduction has been a driving force in literature for much longer than in, say, visual art or music, for obvious reasons. Yet we still have the problem of authenticity; this shows Benjamin must have overestimated the degree to which physical history is important to the authenticity of a given work. Though he considered it a positive thing to dispense with the aura at any rate, the aura persists.

This is why Taylor's description works so much better. By equating artistic authenticity with aesthetic wholeness, the issue of material production is shown to be largely irrelevant. We return again to seeing the incredible parallels between aesthetics and ethics by comparing Taylor's description of an authentic work as one that is "its own goal" with Kant's idea of the person *qua* rational agent as "end-in-itself," right along with "its own form of goodness" just as Kant also attributes to it and expounds upon.

Kundera explained that the novel (and the work of narrative fiction in general) is in fact the map of existence drawn out by the author, which in Chalmers words makes it a physical reproduction of an abstract information space. Baudrillard also speaks of maps in his explanation of the concept of the simulation; he uses the story by Jorge Luis Borges "On Exactitude in Science" as a description of this, in which the cartographers of a certain empire create a map of the same scale as the empire and that coincides with it point for point. Baudrillard explains that the silliness of the concept of a life-sized map is that the useful thing about maps, what Baudrillard calls "the charm of the abstraction" (Baudrillard 167), is that they are *not* the same as the territory, it is precisely the gap between them that helps us understand the Real by way of the Image (the Real, to Baudrillard, is what Kundera refers to as "existence," not what he would call "reality"). The map need not conform with the territory with literal verisimilitude – indeed, this would be pointless. Countries or states, for instance, are obviously not different colours in reality, but the *existence* of abstract, sovereign entities requires the use of different colours in representation of their distinct archetypal natures. In precisely the same way, narrative fiction enables us to connect with the form by way of the work. The form is that abstract entity, the end-in-itself. The work is a physical distillation of this into a model, a simulation, that can be

reproduced and communicated via language such that it puts its readers in contact with the original form that initiated its production. This is the true essence of the authentic work, and the vital component of the ethics of narrative fiction. Just as the cartographer's ethical responsibility is to reproduce the territory as accurately as possible according to his abilities and the conditions available to him, so it is the author of fiction's ethical responsibility to commit to language the shape of the form that presents itself to him as faithfully as he can, to use his soul's creative power to produce an authentic simulation of a hitherto unknown segment of existence.

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Coda

Four bombastic food critics sitting. Since this thing is about the relationship – the, as I argue, very intimate and necessary relationship – between author and text – I thought an apt metaphor to start out with would be an investigation of a sort of Critical Food Theory, to show how absurd it is to evaluate a work based solely on one's own individual response to it rather than the author's intention or the objective characteristics of the work, an individual response which is inevitably going to be coloured by the reader/eater's own tastes and ideologies rather than anything real, rendering it utterly and completely useless to anyone but the reader/eater him/herself.

L'Étranger. A reference to the novel by Camus. It seemed appropriate given some of the vaguely existentialist themes later on, plus it can refer to the author-as-outsider in the sense of being in touch with something beyond the physical world rather than living wholly within its bounds. And it's actually not a bad name for a restaurant, right?

Notorious perfectionist Wolfgang Fuko. A pretty obvious parody amalgam of Wolfgang Puck and Michel Foucault. The Austrian-German forename with the transliteration of the surname into Japanese synthesizes the paradoxical concepts of a meticulously controlling authorial presence on the one hand with a figure who totally rejects the idea of objective truth or meaning on the other.

Chef Fuko requires that. It's important to emphasize that everything in the place, the meals of course but also the atmosphere and the very architecture of the building, are intentional

and have a purpose, even if that purpose is known only to the Chef/author himself – and perhaps not even to him.

Diners may see their own. There actually are restaurants like this, where you have to eat in complete darkness so the appearance of the food won't interfere with your perception of its taste, smell, texture, etc, and the wait staff are all blind. Here it's intended to be a comment on the epistemic asymmetry in knowledge of consciousness generally – the fact that we as subjects only have direct phenomenological experience of our own mind and just have to kind of assume that other people have minds too.

This evening: Sonatas and partitas for solo violin. I like Bach. Douglas Adams considered Bach to be the Music of the Spheres, and I have trouble disagreeing.

A rectangular absence where. An empty spot on a wall wouldn't mean anything to anyone who didn't know what was *supposed* to be there; and to the person who does know, that empty spot can be just as semiotically important as it would be if it bore an actual symbol.

Critic A. Marxist. Everything is about the class struggle. Modeled after Marx himself, right down to the carbunkles.

Critic B. Orientalist. Everything is about colonialism. Modeled after Edward Said, except this guy is very white and his Arab/Muslim cultural sympathies are a complete affectation.

Critic C. Feminist (second wave). Everything is about oppression of women.

Critic D. I don't know. Surrealist? The point is that they've all got the same meal but they can't agree on what it is – this guy can't even agree that it's *food*. Even the content is up for interpretation to them, let alone the meaning. They can't even taste it, as if their ideologies have deadened their tongues. The only thing they can agree on is that “there is no God,” that is, there is no overarching structure that makes the world and the events therein objectively meaningful. They reject Grand Narratives (without noticing that “There is no Grand Narrative” is itself a Grand Narrative of a sort) and are therefore free to make their personal convictions as authoritative as anything that may exist outside themselves. They intimidate with sophistry and jargon and the appearance of righteous indignation instead of relying on facts and logic. These critics are caricatures, of course, but only just barely.

Critics all die instantly. Because Theory is Dead, and good riddance. Grand Narrative strikes back.

“Excuse me?”

Yes?

“Can I ask a question?”

Uh, sure.

“Why did those people have to die?”

I just explained that. It was a metaphor.

“Yes, but...they were people, they had lives, families.”

Not really. They were just characters, and not even very well-developed ones.

“They were people as far as I'm concerned. As much as I am.”

That's debatable. But hold on for a minute, I'm getting to you.

“As you wish.”

Achieving fame under the pseudonym “The Singer.” Modeled mainly after philosopher and animal rights activist Peter Singer. More or less meant to embody the contemporary ideology of utilitarianism. He's literally a singer here because, you know, it's a bit of a pun.

Extremely, *suspiciously* persuasive. He has this super power that can cause otherwise reasonable people to be in his thrall, because it seems to me (biased as I am) that this is the only explanation for the large number of people who seem to currently subscribe to this particular strain of nonsense. But of course if you asked him, this ability came to him for no reason. Because if there had been a reason for it he would have to discover that reason, and if he didn't like it he would either have to alter his beliefs or disobey a higher power. But of course he's wrong. I gave it to him. To make a point that he will never understand.

Agent K, the oldest man in the world. See, I told you I'd get to you.

“Appreciated.”

Modelled pretty clearly after Immanuel Kant. He's 285 years old not only because that's how old Kant would have been at the time of this writing if he'd lived, but also because as Agent K symbolizes an adherence to deontological ethics and the Grand Narrative, which is somewhat of an outdated (which is to say, unfashionable) viewpoint at the moment it seemed apt. His ability is to make good decisions, because that's what having a good will and following the Categorical Imperative does.

“So I'm *not* a real person?”

I wouldn't go that far. You're kind of real. In a sense. You're a physico-linguistic representation of an abstract information space, which so pretty much am I. You're just some levels of, like, emanation down from me. To be perfectly accurate, it's the information space that's real and you're one piece of it, a person-shaped piece, that allows readers to glimpse that information space through you.

“I don't feel like a...a character.”

Well, you're a *main* character. Probably *the* main character. That's why you get to live and those critics had to die. You're all pieces, you're all components of the work, but some have bigger and some have smaller roles to play. The critics were important too. Not just as symbols of the types of theory that I hate. As people. The earthquake had to have real consequences. Four people died. That's real.

“A main character. I suppose I should be...flattered? Grateful?”

If you want. I'm not too picky about it.

“It's my first instinct to be grateful. But that's only because you made it so.”

Well, sort of. I mean, you're *you*. You're Agent K. You're the Agent K in the story that came to me. I could have made you a total son of a bitch, I guess, but it would have been wrong. It would have felt wrong to me, and the story would have been less successful. It's kind of like this: I've got certain shapes already there in my mind, right? I imagine them like bits of wire, like clothes hangers are made of. The things that I experience in my life make new shapes and change old shapes around. Here comes a form from somewhere out there in the whatever you want to call it – the Collective Unconscious or whatever. The form is like a block of Play-Doh. This one chose me because I had all or most of the shapes it needed. Just like what they say about sculptors, how all they really do is chip away the bits of the marble that aren't the statue until only the statue is what's left. Same thing. The story is already there, it just needs a Play-Doh Fun Factory like me to make its physical realization take the right shape.

“It doesn't sound like you understand it very well yourself.”

Well. I'm trying. It's complicated.

“I can tell.”

Was that a shot?

“Not at all.”

Good. Now.

The architectural marvel known today officially as. Generic House of Worship I think pretty clearly symbolizes not religion or spirituality as such, but metaphysics in general, or the need to find a way to access what Baudrillard would call the Real, what Kant would call the Noumenal.

“What would *you* call it?”

Look, I don't know. I don't have all the answers. That's why I'm writing this in the first place. The thing presents itself to you, that doesn't mean you understand it completely. The process of writing it is the process of learning why the form came to *you* in the first place instead of someone else.

“I see. Sorry for interrupting.”

That's okay. So anyway.

A distinct design style for each separate outer wall. Because over the centuries and millennia different people have had very different methods and motivations for their metaphysical investigations, but the intent is always to reach the centre – that everyone has always had in common. The times change, the people change, but the target, the inside of the struggle, always remains the same. Until recently, that is.

Groin vaults, flying buttresses. Real architectural terms, but also hilarious.

A simple circular pool. The passage to the Collective Unconscious via art. Water is a common symbol for the unconscious mind. As Agent K will discover later, when he jumps into it, and ends up here. Why isn't it at the centre of Generic House of Worship instead of out in the courtyard? I'm glad you asked. Even though it doesn't represent religion specifically, Generic House of Worship is the place of conventional attempts to access the Infinite. Art is off to one side. It's available to everyone, even those who have no interest in going inside the actual

building, and you can deny that it's part of the building at all if you want to. Lately I've become more and more convinced that art is for people who can't take religion. Make of that what you will.

One could set one's clock by him. Kant actually did this; he had a schedule and kept to it scrupulously, which I think is pretty cool.

Nobody goes to Generic House of Worship anymore. Because they aren't interested in metaphysics; there isn't anything beyond the physical anymore.

A robot gone mad rampaging. Because that's what superheroes do, and because it's awesome. Also foreshadows the Enormous Wooden Robot that falls from the sky later on, but I didn't know that at the time I wrote this bit. I hadn't seen that far ahead yet.

Maggie Write (born Margaret Falls Reichenbach. Not based directly on anyone, but represents the modern author generally. A little bit David Foster Wallace, just a drop of Flannery O'Connor, etc. Actually a good writer (or supposed to be, anyway; I guess she can't be a better writer than I am, but that's why I didn't include too much of her actual writing, even though at one point her novel became more interesting to me than this thing) but she worries about the superficiality of the media focusing on her and how she looks more than on the content of her writing. Her first name is Margaret because I have a beef with CanCon, but she's Maggie because

so does she. Her original middle and last names are a reference to Reichenbach Falls, the spot where Sherlock Holmes ostensibly died, before his author decided that the character was too profitable to kill off permanently.

Changed for professional reasons as well as to put further distance between her and her already-quite-physically-distant father. Jews do this all the time, even today. Maybe other ethnicities too, I don't know. See e.g.: Jon Stewart, aka Jonathan Stuart Leibowitz.

A peer-reviewed university literary journal. Don't know what this means, but I think it's funny.

A single word surrounded by dozens of blank pages. I do know what the word is, but I'm not telling.

2. **de/position.** Chronologically this is the latest part of the piece. It takes place after Agent K jumps into the pool, and after The Singer encounters Gardner. Thus: de/position, because it's like the examination before a trial, but also because it's out of place here. Also, in physics “deposition” refers to the process of gas transformation into a solid, which is a pretty apt metaphor for a form becoming a work, I think.

[REDACTED]. This is the author speaking. Redacted and sanitized because it shouldn't be too obvious yet that this is metafiction, since even the characters aren't aware of it

at this point. This deconstruction, Part 3 here, in which we're now in the midst, happens chronologically right after, although it's also technically outside of time from the characters' perspectives. And only Agent K gets to be present here. Maggie doesn't need to be, and The Singer hasn't earned it.

“Again, I'm very grateful.”

I know. Thanks. *Outside of time*, it occurs to me, is an interesting concept here. *Time out of joint* might be more accurate, because in terms of the chronology of the piece – the chronology of its narrative, let's say, time works completely differently for author, characters, and reader. The reader can pick the thing up and look at it as a stack of pages, essentially frozen in time. They can read it straight through, in which case the narrative moves forward at a fairly steady pace. They can skip ahead or backward, like time travelling if they want to, but it's always going to be the same words and events. For me, the author, this thing for example takes place over months and months; even though the actual narrative occurs over – what, a few days, at most? – I've gone longer than that without writing the interval between one diegetic *minute* and the next. So from my perspective the timeline is very discontinuous. From the characters' perspective, I guess they just live their lives from the beginning to the end. They don't experience this part as being earlier than the parts that follow even though that's how they're organized here. Maggie and The Singer's narratives end when I stop writing them, but they don't *die*. Not even from their own perspectives. Agent K's goes on for a little while, because he's here with my now.

“Wait. Does that mean I *am* dead?”

Not really. Maybe. It depends. We can talk about it later. The point, I think, is that it's another one of those narratological problems that's also a theological problem, just like the

Problem of Evil there's also the Predestination Paradox. If God knows everything that's ever going to happen to everyone, how can there also be free will? The assumption is that preknowledge is the same as predestination, that if God knows what you're going to do next, then you're not really free to choose your own behaviour. So this is interesting. Agent K, do you feel free?

“I do, yes.”

And yet I know everything that you're ever going to do. I knew it all before you did any of it. How does that work?

“Well, it is a paradox. But the opposite is also a paradox, the absence of freedom. The possibility of moral judgements presupposes it. Without the assumption of freedom, reason cannot act. If we are completely causally determined then any attempt to conceive of a rule that prescribes the means by which some end can be achieved is pointless. Theoretical reason cannot demonstrate freedom, but practical reason must assume for the purpose of action.”

Very good. You – well, not you but Kant, the guy you're based on – wrote about this so you're obviously going to have some pretty good opinions on it. Point is, the reason that I know, that I've always known, what you're going to do isn't because I forced you to do it, but because that's what you always did. That's what you always chose to do, based on your own nature, your own reason, and your own choices. I only knew it because I'm sort of the medium through which your actions are accomplished. Oh, I've got it, check this out: I'm that agent that constrains your possibilities into a single actuality. Not the agent that *causes* your action directly, only the one who forces the sort of collapse of the waveform so that *some* action becomes necessary. You get to decide which one, I just force you to make a choice by putting a narrative in front of you. I

could, hypothetically, make you do anything I wanted to. I could take away your free will and have you, like, dancing at a 1920s speakeasy.

“Please don’t.”

I won’t, I’m just saying. I could do that, but it wouldn’t be right. Because that’s not a faithful rendering of the whatever, the information space. That’s just not what happens, because it’s not who you are. If I decide to constrain *myself* by not controlling your decisions, then you get to do whatever you want to within the framework of the storyworld’s rules, not all of which are known to you, of course, even though I know everything you’re going to do and I’m the one sitting here writing it all down.

Maggie or the notebook. There’s this old morality thought-experiment where there’s a boat about to sink or something and there’s one passenger and the only extant copy of the Complete Works of William Shakespeare, and you only have enough time to save one of them. And it presents kind of a choice between which kind of moral system you want to subscribe to. From a deontological perspective it’s obvious that a human being is an end-in-itself and the Shakespeare book is a bunch of paper and ink, an object. So you have to save the person. From a utilitarian perspective, though, it’s almost the complete opposite: the person is just one person, but by rescuing the Complete Works of William Shakespeare from being destroyed forever you’re ensuring that the entire world’s happiness can be increased, and from that point of view you have to save the book. It’s sad that the person will die, but only for the person and anyone who knew them. The loss of Shakespeare is an overall decrease in the pleasure of millions or even billions of people. For a utilitarian it’s a no-brainer. Both Maggie and her book get saved,

because fortunately for her there's a utilitarian and a deontologist both on hand, but neither of them knows what the other one is doing at the time. If there's an ethics of fiction, if a narrative is an end-in-itself, it would seem that it has to be so for the author only and not for the reader for this reason. I wonder if Maggie would choose to sacrifice herself to save her book. Well, no, I know she wouldn't because I know everything about her. But someone would, probably. And here's the thing: that would be stupid, because it's not the *work* that's an end-in-itself, but the *form*. The work is only the *map*, it shows you how to *get* to the form but it's not the form itself. And you can't destroy a form. Losing the works of Shakespeare would suck because it would eliminate our access to those possibilities but the stories themselves remain intact because nothing can ever actually alter them, they're eternal, they're the expressions of archetypes, they just came to Shakespeare when they wanted to be physically realized and made available to us. But the map is not the terrain, and you can't destroy the world by throwing a globe out the window, even though it would look really dramatic. This isn't a case of self-defence, the book is not a living, intelligent being that's trying to destroy its creator. Though that's a cool image, actually, now that I think about it, and I might use it for something sometime.

An exit sign. I put that there for The Singer to find, because I wanted to see if he'd follow it or not. Well, no, I knew he would follow it. I wanted to show the reader that he would follow it. Even though there's no reason to trust a random sign you just find lying around, obviously. You have to believe that someone put it there, and that that someone doesn't want to mislead you. This speaks to the point about meaning and messages and communication and intentionality: that thing about how a bunch of tree branches falling at random in the shape of a sentence doesn't

mean that the “sentence” carries any actual semiotic content. Of course it would be a hell of a coincidence if some branches fell and spelled out, let's say, “The Toronto Maple Leafs won the Stanley Cup in 1967.” It would be bizarre, but not impossible, for this to happen at random, *except for the fact that it's true*. Nobody in their right mind – that is to say, nobody objective – would be able to believe that this occurred randomly, that it looks meaningful but actually isn't, if that person knows that the assemblage of shapes contains actual, objectively verifiable content. They'd look for someone who had come and arranged the branches this way, and if they could prove that nobody had done this, they'd be forced to assume that something with a mind was controlling the forces that caused the branches to fall in this pattern. To deny it would be pretty irrational. What Barthes and Lacan and their ilk want to do, though (and The Singer does) is kind of eat their cake and have it too; they want to be able to extract semiotic content from things by sheer force of will while vehemently denying that anyone put any content in there in the first place. Nothing means anything if nobody meant anything by it, is what it basically comes down to. And the reason that Barthes and Lacan and The Singer do this is ideological, not rational. It's because they're good little utilitarians. Here's how their logic goes: the existence of Objective Meaning/Grand Narrative/God represents a restriction on my freedom; restricting my freedom makes me unhappy; anything that makes me unhappy is bad (with the implication that anything that makes them happy or unhappy personally ought to make everyone happy or unhappy respectively, which shows you the arrogance of this position, or, at best, exhibits a sort of Nietzschean Will-to-Power bullying tactic, like if they can convince enough people that what they themselves prefer is what is actually best, then it becomes so), therefore Objective Meaning/Grand Narrative/God doesn't exist. I'm sure you can see the flaws in this reasoning. But

you can't have it both ways. That is to say, if The Singer finds an exit sign somewhere and it actually points to an exit, that's because someone put it there who wanted him to be able to find his way out. There's a scene in Murakami's novel *A Wild Sheep Chase* where the protagonist is talking to a limousine driver who happens to be a theist. The driver claims that he has God's telephone number and he talks to Him sometimes. It's a nice day outside, and just to make conversation, the protagonist says, "When it gets this clear, God's messages must have no trouble getting through at all."

"Nothing of the kind," said the chauffer with a grin. "There are messages already in all things. In the flowers, in the rocks, in the clouds..."

"And cars?"

"In cars too."

"But cars are made by factories."

"Whosoever makes it, God's will is worked into it."

Which is clearly Murakami's message to us, the readers, just as much as to the protagonist, that everything in the novel is there because the author put it there, all of it is significant, has both a purpose and a meaning. The extent to which this is Murakami's actual personal theology is unclear, but as literary theory it is a powerful refutation of the Death of the Author. The fact is that if a text has an objective meaning (for anyone – including the characters in the text) then it has to have had an author, and vice versa; if a text has an author it must have an objective meaning. Furthermore, it would be insane for a character to assume not only that

meaning can be derived from a random occurrence but even more insane to believe that they can *apprehend* such a meaning for absolutely no reason. This is another old theodicy similar to lots of the stuff Kant put forward about how you have to make certain base assumptions that are themselves unprovable in order for anything at all to make sense, but it applies equally well for our purposes here: existence is communication, because the concept of objective reality comes from intersubjectivity, right? But if we assume that our ability to gain information about the world came about without an authorial hand guiding it, then it would be nuts to think that our senses are capable of receiving any knowledge whatsoever. All knowledge, Kant tells us, comes from experience, and all experience comes through our senses, and if our senses came about by *no mechanism other than* what doesn't get us killed gets to stick around for at least one more generation, then it's a very huge leap to make the assumption that we can derive any *accurate* information from them. Note the difference between *useful* information and accurate information. You can't keep knowledge and discard organizing principles, it just doesn't make sense. That's why Barthes came up with the Death of the Author; he understood this very well, and, to his credit, is not shy about admitting it. His expressed goal is to dethrone God, he says it straight out, and to do that he has to make meaning and communication into incoherent concepts. And he's willing to discard all of law and science and morality to do it, and that's very nice if it works for him, but it's also ridiculous and impossible and stupid. Barthes, after all, wrote this essay about The Death of the Author and would probably be upset if you tried to tell him that it wasn't a piece of literary theory but, like, a recipe for pancakes or something. You know?

The man you see pictured on the WALK signal. Yeah, that was me. Well, not *me*. The “implied author,” I guess, or maybe nothing so concrete as that even. The representation of the fact that something sensible is going on. Something *person-shaped*, something *mind-shaped*, imminent within and yet transcendent of the storyworld. Spurring Agent K to go on, to move forward in the narrative. That nothing is a coincidence.

“I *knew* it! I was right.”

You did know it. You were right. Yes you were.

3.a> **Excerpt from early in.** Maggie doesn't take part in the deposition because she's much more directly, literally involved with the issue at hand, the authorship stuff. So I stuck in a bit from her novel instead.

Break from work and we spend the whole time talking about products. It occurred to me that I spend a lot of time talking about cell phone plans with people. It's like the new weather or something, the new excuse for small-talk. I did in fact just get a new phone and a new plan. Unlimited text messaging. QWERTY keyboard. Still can't afford an iPhone.

Buying time from one corporation for more money than I sell my own time to a different corporation for. “Time is money” has never been more literal than it is today.

3.b> **Little silhouette of a man.** There he is again.

4. **Give up writing to raise peafowl.** A Flannery O'Connor reference. She used it as a symbol for how terrible people are, but here it's more about responsibility in a broader sense.

Probably unfilmable. I met someone who was turned off David Foster Wallace after seeing the ill-conceived film adaptation of “Brief Interviews with Hideous Men.” Valiant effort, filmmakers, but no. You just can't do that.

Pelargonium. Also known as geranium. Another Flannery O'Connor reference.

A striking Red Admiral. This is a reference to Nabokov's “Pale Fire,” which is very concerned with butterflies. In a way, the whole third part of this thing is a reference to Pale Fire. I think it's working pretty well. It also turns out that Red Admiral butterflies do indeed feed on geraniums, which is another one of those little “coincidences” that made me feel like I was on the right track here.

Wrote a novel with a very strong earthquake motif, and then were caught in the middle of a mysterious earthquake yourself. So here's something interesting. Agent K, this will impress you. All this stuff about earthquakes, right? The same metaphor that Maggie is using in her novel is the metaphor I'm using in this thing, which I hope I don't need to actually spell out here explicitly, but the point is that in this story earthquakes don't happen here, but this one did, and that's what leads Agent K to believe initially that something strange, something *unnatural*

was going on. During the course of my writing this, *there was an earthquake in the city in which I live*. Not a big one. Magnitude 5.0. Nobody was hurt and nothing was damaged, thank God. But earthquakes are pretty rare in Toronto, the last one was about twelve years ago apparently. And since I happened to be writing something where the occurrence of an earthquake in an otherwise non-earthquake-prone region was meant as a sort of signal that *someone is trying to tell you something*, it was kind of spooky – let's say kind of *synchronistic* – that an earthquake would actually happen right in the midst of my writing. Too much of a coincidence for me and my poor old superstitious brain. Your mileage may vary. I was out of town at the time, I was in Monsey, New York to attend the wedding of a second-cousin, but the point stands. Weird, huh?

Enormous wooden robot falling out of the sky. I don't know, it just came to me.

I have a bad feeling about this. Star Wars reference.

Her unpublished novel that she poured out of herself like acid sweat over years written out in chalk. And it was there before she wrote it. In a certain way the writing is the fuel of this thing more even than the fire upstairs that Agent K will find.

A great potted octopus or something. The mind, the narrative centre of gravity.

A person? A machine? A story. Natural yet synthetic, grown yet constructed. Somewhere, somehow alive, but at the same time not really. A possibility made physical.

Tromping over buildings.

At the very top. Just so Agent K can see the stained-glass window.

5. **Was finally just starting to get somewhere with that thing.** Here's the thing: I worry that I'm giving too much away here. Which is the point. The idea is that you could never get all of this just reading it for yourself – you'd get as much of it as I was effective enough to put across successfully, but you can't possibly get the stuff that's just out of my mind or my life, the things I had that made the story choose me to tell it instead of someone else. But at the same time that's part of the fun, isn't it? When the magician shows you how the trick is done it isn't magic anymore. Besides which, I think (and I may be wrong here) that I've explained things enough in the preceding parts that if you really want to you can figure out the rest of it on your own, and that's probably better for everyone involved. Don't you agree? Maybe you'll be right and maybe you'll be wrong about it, but I think – I hope – that I've been right in my writing of it. These things never come through exactly the way they present themselves to the soul: they can't, they're transmitted through an imperfect, very limited medium after all. Even Guinness is strained through fish membranes before it goes into the barrel. But I've presented it as honestly as I could, and it means whatever it means, no more and no less. Well. Maybe more. Definitely not less, though. So I think I'll leave it here.

“Excuse me?”

Oh, hi.

“May I ask a question?”

Of course.

“What happens to me now? Now that...the story is over.”

That is an excellent question. And it's beyond the scope of this piece.

“But do I just...disappear...or...?”

Hm. I wouldn't like to think so.

“Neither would I, as a matter of fact.”

You're an archetype, you can't just vanish. I don't think that it's, like, scientifically possible. Archetypes are eternal. You're a bit of a form made physical.

“Yes, but what happens to me personally? To my consciousness, my persistence of memory? To me as me, not just as archetype? I've lived a long time, it's true...or it feels as if I have, at any rate. But I haven't tired of it yet. And I wouldn't like to think that The Singer and Maggie Write just end in the middle of nowhere and that's that. I hope I'm not speaking out of turn.”

Not at all. I care about what you have to say. I'm just trying to figure out what to do. I can send you back, if you want. All of you. I mean, the story will still be over but you won't know that. It will go on for you. And the others. Or I can call it a day and return you to the Collective Unconscious or Information Space or whatever you want to call it. And you can be united with the rest of the story just like you were before I wrote it, when it was just a form. Up to you.

“This Information Space. Is it sort of an afterlife, then? For...fictional characters?”

I guess so, kind of yeah. Afterlife, beforelife, duringlife.

“If I might ask...could we – The Singer, Maggie Write and myself – be sent back to the story to live the remainder of our lives and then after some appropriately generous period of time

(from our perspectives, of course) be sent on to that, if I may, undiscovered country?”

Hamlet. Or Star Trek VI. I like it.

“Does that mean...?”

Yeah, you've got a deal. Done and done.

“Thank you very much.”

Anytime. It's been a pleasure working with you, Agent K.

“Likewise, I'm sure.”

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