

Reflection Statement

The reader has become a formidable force in contemporary literature, and their nascent agency has dramatically altered our literary paradigm. The profound effect that the Digital Revolution has had on the text, author and reader interrelationships is a subject that has been left largely untouched by modern scholarship, and it is this Gordian mass that I have attempted to unravel in my research by marrying literary theory to our Digital Age. Through analysis of the dissertations of Roland Barthes — ‘The Death of the Author’ (1977)⁴²— and Michel Foucault — ‘What is an Author?’ (1977)⁴³— I have attempted to elucidate how their poststructuralist theories are relevant to the “volatile field”⁴⁴ of our present-day literary paradigm. The reader-response criticism of Stanley Fish, Wolfgang Iser and David Bleich made clear to me the parallels between the reader-centric pre-Internet theory and post-Internet reality, and how the proleptic faculties of such theory can help modern readers understand their own literary status quo. To represent the reader’s acquired hegemony I researched formal aspects of fictocriticism, ending up using personal digressions in the footnotes both to give the reader agency in disturbing the linear “narrative trajectory”⁴⁵ and to draw metafictional attention to the thin artifice of the self-conscious text. The mutations of the modern text as a product of technology has drastically influenced the nature and role of the reader— a change that has had multifarious effects on our literary interactions and one that threatens the authentic reading experience.

Initially, my Major Work’s concept was configured around a survey of twentieth-century literary criticism that in turn germinated from my intrigue in the disjunct between authorial intent and receptive interpretation. My research for the Preliminary English Extension course introduced this notion to me through the work of Albert Camus, and the ‘existentialist’ label that he himself rejected. The Textual Conversations module within this year’s Advanced course similarly fanned my interest in authorial intent through William Snodgrass’ enmity towards being deemed a Confessional poet, even after ‘Heart’s Needle’ was widely regarded as one of the pioneering works of the style. My conceptual beginnings, however, specialised to consider how the poststructural theories manifested themselves in our contemporary world. Exposure to the research of Luke

⁴² Barthes, R (1977) ‘The Death of the Author’ *Image, music, text* [New York: Hill and Wang], 148.

⁴³ Foucault, M (1977) ‘What is an Author?’ *Language, Counter-Memory, Practice: Selected Essays and Interviews* [New York: Cornell University Press], 113-38.

⁴⁴ Barthes, 146.

⁴⁵ Odin, J.K. (1997) *The Performative and Processual: A Study of Hypertext/Postcolonial Aesthetic*, ‘Part One: Shifting Textual Boundaries’, 1.

Tredinnick⁴⁶ and Nancy Patterson⁴⁷ aided me in drawing the connections between literary theory and the Internet Age, catalysing my conceptual refinement. As my field of research narrowed and my familiarity with poststructuralism grew (shedding excess material on Russian Formalism, New Criticism and Marxist theory) a thesis began to develop. It was through David Foster Wallace's diatribes against the indolence of contemporary readership⁴⁸ that my impassioned defence of authentic reading experience was fostered. This personal conviction seeps into the essay in patches of assertive diction: "unqualified criticism" is "dangerous", making the Internet a "minefield of misleading explosives". Likewise, as my thesis matured, so too did my purpose— to make readers aware of the detrimental implications of the Internet for their autonomous reading experience. Wary not to marginalise my own Major Work into the esoteric realm of literary theory, the essay's contemporarily relevant issues and discussion of well-known novels and authors such as J.K. Rowling, Anne Rice, John Green and E.L. James, enables a wider demographic of popular engagement. Using invented phrases for my colloquial subheadings such as "Helicopter Authorship", my comical title "Authors are monkeys who mean", and the 'Infinite Monkey Theorem' cartoon in the front matter likewise sought to establish an informal register and joviality that broadens my Major Work's accessibility to readers. Similarly, I tried my best to avoid adopting an academic voice that confines the work's reception to a scholarly readership, opting for a personal tone that sought to imitate the ethical essays 'Shooting an Elephant'⁴⁹ and 'Consider the Lobster'⁵⁰. Despite these popular intentions, I nevertheless aspire for publication in an academic literary journal such as *Australian Literary Studies*, where I believe my work would best find its best-suited audience.

⁴⁶ Tredinnick, L (2006) 'Post-structuralism, hypertext, and the World Wide Web' *Aslib Proceedings*, vol.59, no.2, 169-186.

⁴⁷ Patterson, N (2000) 'Hypertext and the Changing Role of Readers' *The English Journal*, vol.90, no.2, 74-80.

⁴⁸ He expressed this concern for the future nature of reading in several interviews with Charlie Rose, Eduardo Lago and German television broadcasting company ZDF.

⁴⁹ Orwell, G. (2003) *Shooting An Elephant: and Other Essays* [London: Penguin].

⁵⁰ Wallace, D.F. (2005) *Consider the Lobster: and Other Essays* [New York: Little Brown and Co.].

From the outset of my Major Work I was stubbornly decided on the fictocritical form. As noted by Gerrit Haas in his *Fictocritical Strategies*⁵¹ and Simon Robb in his ‘Fictocritical Sentences’⁵², fictocriticism is often seen to be intrinsically associated with post-structuralism. Haas infers that it is “ethically motivated”⁵³ by post-structuralist theory, whilst Robb explicitly points out that Barthes’ “readerly” and “writerly”⁵⁴ categorisation of texts can be duly applied to fictocriticism, since it demands a more active reader to ‘complete’ the fictive, and thus subjective, components of the text. Fictocriticism’s suitability to my post-structuralist subject matter was further reinforced by my reading of Harvey Hix’s fictocritical essay ‘Morte d’Author: An Autopsy’, in which he declares, “I shall examine the author’s corpse with a special concern to establish its identity, and I shall study the event of the author’s death by analysing texts relevant to it.”⁵⁵ Taking inspiration from Hix I contemplated various fictocritical forms such as the ‘author’s will, eulogy or obituary. However, my early enthusiasm for the form began to wane as I struggled with integrating the constituent fictive and critical parts into a cohesive whole. From here, I researched alternative ways of achieving a similar effect through form, and, upon realising the efficacy of David Foster Wallace’s idiosyncratic use of endnotes to mimetically destabilise the interrelationships of the author, reader and text, decided to pursue a new formal path.

In composing my Major Work, I was acutely aware of the capacity for structure and form to determine meaning, and how I could harness this to deliver my impassioned defence of the reader’s hegemony. In particular, my use of metatextuality to expose the author-reader-text relationships underlying the Major Work’s aesthetic artifice was inspired by Patricia Waugh’s seminal work *Metafiction: The Theory and Practice of Self-Conscious Fiction* (1984). Consciously trying to resist the magnetism of academic detachedness that is so prevalent in literary theory, my essay is interspersed with footnotes of personal digressions, inspired by the labyrinthine endnotes of David Foster Wallace’s *Infinite Jest* (1996). This formal decision allowed me to both parallel the reader-text intimacy that thematically occupies my essay and also to explore the delineating effect of footnotes that are able to disrupt the “narrative trajectory”. By repeatedly drawing the reader’s attention back to my own narratological presence (“I admire...”, “It seems to me...”) I intended to

⁵¹ Haas, G (2017) *Fictocritical Strategies: Subverting Textual Practices of Meaning, Other, and Self-Formation* [Columbia University Press].

⁵² Robb, S (2001) ‘Fictocritical Sentences’ *University of Adelaide Press*, vol.5, no.2; Also worthy of note is that Robb recognises the theoretical similarities that exist between fictocriticism and hypertext.

⁵³ Haas, 7.

⁵⁴ This dichotomy was coined by Barthes in *S/Z* (1970).

⁵⁵ Hix, H (1987) ‘Morte D'Author: An Autopsy’ *The Iowa Review*, vol.17, no.1, 131-150.

illuminate the authorial artifice in a metafictional light. Additionally, the inclusion of a mouse cursor in the “hypertext” subheading sought to accentuate my Major Work’s metafictional aspect as a text talking about texts. This way, the reader was dually aware—from both content and form— of the fluctuating stability of the relationships between themselves, the author and the text. Additionally, à la Wallace, my use of footnotes as “cruft”⁵⁶ (as distinct from practical citation purposes) enabled me to disrupt the placid linearity of conventional print literature. By tangentially sidetracking the reader from the main text, I myself, as author, exercised authorial power over the sequence in which the text is read, and thus over the reader themselves. In doing this, I drew attention to the metafictional power dynamics between author and reader that are prevalent in my Major Work, paralleling my formal and thematic elements to form a conceptually cohesive whole.

To attribute my Major Work holistic cohesiveness and textual integrity (concepts introduced to me by Module B of the Advanced English course), I also used a sustained metaphor that fictionalised the exchange of power as the reader’s usurpation of the “Author-God”’s throne.⁵⁷ By appropriating Barthes’ metaphor that forms his underlying argument— “semantic domain”; “the heir to the ‘Author-God’’s throne”; “sceptre of meaning”; “crusade into the authorial realm”; “army of pillaging readers”— I deliberately engaged in his intertextual theory that the text is comprised of “a tissue of quotations”.⁵⁸ Likewise, my appropriation can be seen as a nod to the vast allusive ‘web’ that has been dilated by hypertext, within which the text is “always anterior, never original”.⁵⁹ In doing this I was both paying homage to the great thinkers that occupy the subject of my Major Work, and also trivialising the author’s role and parodying their creative capacity (authors are, after all, merely monkeys who mean). By enfeebling myself as the “Author-God” I oppositely empowered the reader, elucidating the importance of the reader’s interpretative hegemony in our Digital Age, where the creator’s “tyrannical vice” over meaning inhibits the free and authentic reading experience. This power contrast is most evident in my conclusion, where I once again draw attention to my Major Work’s metatextuality through direct rhetorical address to the reader: “How does the crown feel on your head?” It is by elucidating the reversal of power that I provide a proleptic glimpse of our future interaction with literature—one, I hope, where the reader is unbounded by authorial shackles of our Internet Age.

⁵⁶ The use of this term in application to Wallace’s encyclopaedic fiction was popularised by David Letzler in *The Cruft of Fiction: Mega-Novels and the Science of Paying Attention* (2017).

⁵⁷ “Author-God” is a term used by Barthes to dramatise his deicidal proclamation; 147.

⁵⁸ Barthes, 144.

⁵⁹ Ibid.

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