

You Are Not the Writer I Imagined

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The text “A Human Education?” asks who it is “in communication with.” It wonders whom it addresses, who the reader of the written text is and the listener to the spoken version. It responds to its own question, “I am speaking to all humans,” but it is aware of the critiques of humanism, of the humanism of Desiderius Erasmus that posited a Human with a capital “H.” Such antihumanist critiques, however, have not dispelled the desire for a human education. The text, then, seeks to recast humanism, establishing humanity not in some specific image, such as of the white, male philosopher, nor in an authentic self, but in “being human together,” in “communion and wonder.”

In response, I want to celebrate not human communion but the liberation of the text, the text’s freedom to wander after it is set free from the expectation of expressing the meanings and intentions of the human who writes or speaks it. The “Masked Philosopher” experiment of the 2015 Philosophy of Education Society conference freed me from worrying about any human communion that would ensue or fail because it freed me from knowing the author and thus imagining the writer. I could engage with a text qua text and could produce a text that engaged with a text — not with a person. Some might find this unpopulated universe of text bleak, a universe in which “writing is the destruction of every voice, of every point of origin” and in which the reader “is simply that someone who holds together in a single field all the traces by which the written text is constituted.”¹ But a text free from a concern with communion is a text free to celebrate its engagement — its play, its fight, its intercourse — with other text.

Roland Barthes was wrong, of course, to imagine that the disappearance of the writer meant the disappearance of the author; the very fact that I refer to “Roland Barthes” rather than “The Death of the Author” suggests the persistence of the name of the author as an imprint or mark. As Michel Foucault explains, “an author’s name ... performs a certain role with regard to narrative discourse, assuring a classificatory function. Such a name permits one to group together a certain number of texts, define them, differentiate them from, and contrast them to others. In addition, it establishes a relationship among the texts.”²

The “Masked Philosopher” experiment meant that I did not know the name of the author of the paper, nor whether the name of the author coincided with the name of a person. That the copyright to the books authored by bell hooks is held by Gloria Watkins and that Jackie Derrida, named after an American film star, thought it better to adopt the more distinguished and French sounding “Jacques” when he started publishing confirms that the name of the author and the name of the person who writes regularly do not coincide.³ In other words, even if I had known the name of the author, I might not have known the name of the writer. More importantly,

though, even if I had known both the name of the author, and thus of the category of texts with which this text is linked, and the name of the writer, I would not have known the true meaning of the text or the true intentions of the writer. Knowing the writer of the text, even hearing the writer of the text become a speaker of the text and breathe and intone the text in person does not bring me to the text; for that, I need to dwell with the text, not its author or writer.

This Masked Philosopher experiment in which we are all participants is a little different from the one performed by Foucault in 1980, when he withheld his name in an interview published in the French newspaper *Le Monde*. In that interview, Foucault explains, “Why did I suggest that we use anonymity? Out of nostalgia for a time when, being quite unknown, what I said had some chance of being heard. With the potential reader, the surface of contact was unrippled.”⁴ Although the author of “A Human Education?” was unknown until just moments before the presentation of the paper, the text’s surface of contact does not appear unrippled. Indeed, the author did not choose but was assigned anonymity, and is hovering just beneath the surface of the text, eager to break through and to swim in its “antirhetorical, unargumentative bloom.”

This response does not ask who it is in communication with. It knows that it addresses not a “who” but a “what,” namely the text “A Human Education?” This response does not know who the readers of its written text will be nor the listeners to the spoken version, but it is unperturbed by this not-knowing. It does not actively seek to keep an anonymous audience at a distance; it simply accepts that it has no control over where this text will go, in whose hands or eyes or minds it will land, and what these will do with it. “A Human Education?” seeks communion, “a revitalized humanist conversation” without wanting to either imagine or destroy the humanity of the interlocutors. It wants to imagine writers and readers not as the white, male face of Hans Holbein’s Erasmus but perhaps as Henri Matisse’s dancers, joined together in expression unburdened by identity. By contrast, this response imagines as its interlocutor neither Holbein’s Erasmus nor Matisse’s dancers but something more like Juan Gris’s *The Open Book*. You are not the writer I imagined because I did not imagine a writer; I read a text.

What are we to make of all this in an educational sense? Perhaps “A Human Education?” can be read as a phenomenological account or performance of study, a text providing insight into the lived experience of a reader grappling with texts and oeuvres. But perhaps we can also raise some more general questions about how Barthes’s and Foucault’s views on authorship might affect how we read and engage with texts and how we teach our students to do so. I want to honor the spirit of Foucault in his role as masked philosopher when he said, “I can’t help but dream about a kind of criticism that would try not to judge but to bring an oeuvre, a book, a sentence, an idea to life; it would light fires, watch the grass grow, listen to the wind, and catch the sea foam in the breeze and scatter it.”⁵ I want to multiply the images conjured by the paper to include not only multiple faces of readers and writers but also multiple images of texts. But I also want to affirm texts’ independence from the human hands and voices that produced them. A text always offers more and

less than, and something altogether different from, the identity and humanity and intentions of any writer.

“A Human Education?” is a meditation that seeks to recast text and language as conducive to human togetherness rather than as a barrier to it. It promotes poetic discourse that presents rather than represents, and it critiques “the conventional academic talk.” I share the criticism of the instrumental use of text “trying to offer something reliably useful to whoever might want to take it.” But in its place I want to suggest not another use of text, that is, as a vehicle for promoting human communion and shared wonder at the world, but a return to the text. The text, even in a conventional academic genre, is worth dwelling in not because it brings us closer to its writer or to human communion, but because, as text, as part of the textual world and inheritance we inhabit, it merits our engagement.

At the end of the essay “What is an Author?,” Foucault speculates about the disappearance of the author function: “We would no longer hear the questions that have been rehashed for so long: Who really spoke? Is it really he and not someone else? With what authenticity or originality? And what part of his deepest self did he express in his discourse?”⁶ Then, it would not matter whether the author is “wholly unlike me” or simply not the writer I imagined. Then, it would be possible to engage with the text and its intertextuality, its circulation of and intervention in discourses, and its inexhaustible “proliferation of meanings” and effects.⁷

1. Roland Barthes, “The Death of the Author,” in *Image – Music – Text*, trans. Stephen Heath (New York: Hill and Wang, 1978), 142, 148.

2. Michel Foucault, “What is an Author?,” trans. Josué V. Harari, in Paul Rabinow, ed., *The Foucault Reader* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1984), 107.

3. Jacques Derrida, “A ‘Madness’ Must Watch over Thinking,” trans. Peggy Kamuf, in Elisabeth Weber, ed., *Points . . . Interviews, 1974–1994* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1995), 343–344.

4. Michel Foucault, “The Masked Philosopher,” trans. Alan Sheridan, in Paul Rabinow, ed., *Ethics, Subjectivity and Truth: The Essential Works of Michel Foucault 1954–1984, vol. I* (New York: The New Press, 1997), 321.

5. *Ibid.*, 323.

6. Foucault, “What Is an Author?” 119.

7. *Ibid.*, 118.