

Let's Get Lost: From the Death of the Author to the Disappearance of the Reader

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The story goes that when Elizabeth I watched a staging of Shakespeare's *Richard II*, she exclaimed with some dismay, "Richard is me!" That "shock of recognition" and of identification is probably familiar to any reader; we can all exclaim, in this respect, "*Elizabeth* is me!" In a literary work, actions and characters often reveal to us uncomfortable truths about ourselves: in Hamlet's indecision we see our own dithering, in Oedipus' reckless pursuit of the truth we recognize our own obstinate self-ignorance in the name of principles; there are endless examples, including examples represented within literature, as when Hamlet hopes that the tragedy enacted by the players will "catch the conscience of the king," and reveal to Claudius his own guilt in the murder of Hamlet's father. But literature also provides other examples, offering a different lesson: Don Quixote mistaking himself for a "knight errant," Emma Bovary mistaking herself for the heroine of a romantic novel. Often the shock of recognition is a shock of misrecognition, where the characters and actions in a literary work are identified not with who we are, but with an imaginary self, whether that self is what we would like to be but are not (as in Don Quixote's case), or the self we dread becoming or fear represents some basic, and base, truth about ourselves. Of course, Don Quixote was mad, as was Emma Bovary, after her fashion. But what if every identification with a literary character were a misidentification, every recognition a misrecognition? Elizabeth, for all her imaginings about her weakness as a "prince," was, after all, *not* Richard II. There is an element of madness in any act of identification with a literary character, whether fictional or real. The "shock of recognition" is the effect of an illusion, and above all of the primary and inevitable illusion of the unified "self" that results from our childhood habit of identifying ourselves with the unified image of the face and body that looks out at us from the mirror. This is the first misrecognition, and the problem with it is not so much that it is mistaken and mad but that in placing us within the constraints of a well-defined "identity," it is not nearly mad enough.

Since Barthes proclaimed "the death of the author," and since Foucault relegated the "author" to a legal-critical function, we have become quite used to separating the author from the work, the writer from the author, and the writer from the flesh-and-blood individual who did other things besides write. We no longer look to the work to reveal the truth of

the author, or to the author to reveal the truth of the work—at least not when we are reading in a critically informed and self-consciously “academic” way. But we still seem to look to literature to find the truth of *the reader*; we expect literature to show us “who we really are,” for good or ill, “warts and all.” Instead of making an inference from work to author, we make an inference from work to reader. What if both inferences were equally questionable? What if there were another way to read, which did not lead us back into ourselves (or into some “human condition” we share with everyone else), but away from ourselves, into the unknown?

Gilles Deleuze offers a theory of writing and of reading that makes both activities “lines of flight,” a movement away from the familiar and the known, an act of “deterritorialization.” The aim of literature is not to help us get our bearings or to find ourselves, but to lose our bearings and our “selves,” to *get lost*. Deleuze says that “to create is to lighten, to unburden life, to invent new possibilities of life,”¹ and that “the only end of writing is life,” “an impersonal yet singular life” that is beyond the personality or character of the person who lives it,² “a non-personal power,”³ “beyond the perceptual states and affective transitions of the lived,”⁴ a “more than personal life” beyond “the poverty of the imaginary and the symbolic” (D, 51). Writing and reading are not voyages of self-discovery, based on the desire to have oneself and one’s claims recognized by others, but a pure “voyage out” in which one loses one’s identity and slips through “the objective determinations which fix us, put us into a grille, identify us and make us recognized” (D, 45). Writing as a line of flight is a way out, not “out of the world” and into the imaginary, but out of identity, the known, established orders of meaning and of right, always moving from the defined to the undefined, from a dominant term to a minor one (CC, 1). Rather than cementing or confirming an identity, writing and reading unsettle it: “It is always a question of freeing life wherever it is imprisoned or of tempting it into an uncertain combat” (WIP, 171), of discovering “the splendor of *l’On*,”⁵ “the power of an impersonal” third person beneath the apparent persons “that strips us of the power to say ‘I’” (CC, 3). “One has to disappear, to become unknown” (D, 45).

This may sound reassuringly familiar to connoisseurs of the modern. It seems to resemble the pursuit of the exotic and the foreign in Conrad, Melville, or T. E. Lawrence. Yet despite Deleuze’s admiration for Melville and Lawrence, writing’s line of flight is not a trip that takes a self or identity intact from one place to another (D, 37). However “exotic,” “strange,” or “surprising” the destination, a destination is an end-point, something that can be located and “plotted,” and which retrospectively defines and determines the line leading towards it. It is no use fleeing

one identity for another, like the Americans and Europeans who sought their "primitive" selves in the colonial outposts of the South Pacific, Africa, or Asia. This is to journey from the known to the known, even if the known and defined term towards which one flees is something with which one is unacquainted, and therefore "strange." It is not a matter of assuming masks or identities, like an "imposter" who seeks to become "someone else" in order to claim new powers, a new territory, a new order, in the manner of Conrad's Lord Jim or Kurz (see D, 41–5). Exoticism's discovery of new selves, or of a foreign self that reveals the secret heart of darkness in the familiar self, is not getting lost or getting rid of oneself.

Odysseys, however estranging, nevertheless retain the pattern of Homer's original, and a "line of flight" is the opposite of an Odyssey. Odysseus remains himself throughout his voyages (unlike, say, his crew, who are really transformed into beasts), and returns home to reclaim his rightful place—his kingdom, his household, his servants, his wife—the subject reclaiming the properties that define him. His homecoming is complete when he is recognized, when all the masks fall away and his identity is revealed, when he is no longer the wayfaring stranger because the marks and signs have been deciphered, his secret uncovered. In that respect, the *Odyssey* is the model of tragic drama, the pivotal moment always being that of "recognition and reversal," whether recognition leads to destruction (*Oedipus the King*, *Lord Jim*) or a return to where one belongs (*Odyssey*).⁶ Whether for good or ill, every tragedy effects a return to one's "true" self, and it is this structure of estrangement and return that makes the tragic plot a unified whole, with a beginning, a middle, and a conclusion.

Modern literature's line of flight, by contrast, effects what F. Scott Fitzgerald calls "a clean break": "A clean break is something you cannot come back from; that is irretrievable because it makes the past cease to exist."⁷ A true voyage out is where "you can't go home again" because neither you nor home any longer exists. What Deleuze calls "deteritorialization" is this departure without arrival or return, a voyage that is always *in media res*, without beginning or ending, but purely and simply "in the middle" of a path, *en route*: "There is no terminus from which you set out, none which you arrive at or ought to arrive at" (D, 30, 2). Not only in the modern novel, but from its inception, "the novel has always been defined by the adventures of lost characters who no longer know their name, what they are looking for, or what they are doing," from Chrétien de Troyes' knights errant to Beckett's Molloy.⁸ These characters cannot be recognized because they are not attached to the particularities or properties that would mark them and which they could claim as their own, but are "without references, without possessions,

without properties, without qualities, without particularities ... without past or future" (CC, 74; see D, 31, 38, 43), existing only in the midst of the open road or the open sea, leading a life without seeking salvation, voyaging without any particular aim, with freedom as their sole fulfillment. "All referents are lost": Melville's Ahab cannot return home and cannot find refuge in a new port or haven because he is fleeing from everywhere, carried off on a line of flight where he and the whale enter into a zone of proximity, indistinction, indiscernibility, or ambiguity (CC, 78), each losing himself in the other as much as the other loses itself in him, such that neither can be reduced or assimilated to the other (D, 2; WIP, 173). This is not finding one's true self—through either personal or collective memory, or recognition—or a new self, but losing the self in a process of becoming that confuses and destabilizes all the terms, a demonic passage *between* terms, "in which each pushes the other, draws it into its line of flight in a combined deterritorialization" (D, 44), "where I can no longer be distinguished from what I am becoming" (CC, 65). As Deleuze so pithily puts it: "'See me as I am': all that stuff is over" (D, 47–8).

Of course, this raises a number of questions. Why would a dissolution of the self be salutary? Would it not also be dangerous? How exactly does literature effect such a dissolution? What is wrong with the reader identifying with literary characters?

Deleuze, following certain trends in French psychoanalysis, regards the ego or Me (*le Moi*) as a result of a process of identification, whereby in identifying with another one consolidates the Self and establishes certain boundaries of inclusion and exclusion. In a sense, Deleuze agrees with Locke's equation of the self with property—every man has a property in his own person—*private* property, fenced around and marked with "No trespassing" signs. The boundaries of the self are established by a subject imitating the image or model it identifies with; the subject tries "to assume a form, to appropriate the image, to adapt itself to this image and the image to itself," an effort at which the subject "either succeeds or fails," and which "always risks falling into neurosis or turning into narcissism" (CC, 76, 78, 76). The self defined by how successfully it imitates a model or image is from the outset a false self, just as "an invariable model, a fixed form" is itself false, since what is absent from both is "the power of metamorphosis" or creative activity: not a fixed form, but a process of trans-formation, of pure becoming, "a surging forth of life" (CC, 104, 105). The ego, then, as a mere reflection of a dead model, is "already dead"; it is therefore necessary to "stop thinking of yourself as an ego in order to live as a flow, a set of flows in relation with other flows, outside of oneself and within oneself," a life of forces and flows that is always traversing points rather than being confined

within a fixed boundary (CC, 51). In great writing, says Deleuze, a "character" is a unique, chance combination of forces, "collections of intensive sensations," "Individuation without a subject" (D, 39–40), revealing that "At the most profound level of subjectivity, there is not an ego, but rather a singular composition, an idiosyncrasy ... marking the unique chance that ... *this* combination had been thrown and not another" (CC, 120).

It might seem that identification with a character would release the flow of life between one person and the other, but such identifications really amount to an attempt to appropriate and absorb the other, "recovering persons and possessions" by relating impersonal life forces to "me" and "mine" (CC, 65). In this, the reader who identifies with a character is much as Milan Kundera describes two people having a conversation:

First one of them does all the talking, the other one breaks in with 'That's just like me, I ...' and goes on talking about himself until his partner has a chance to say 'That's just like me, I ...'. [This] may look like a form of agreement, a way of carrying the other party's idea further, but that is an illusion. What they really are is ... a battle for the ears of others.⁹

When a reader identifies with a character in a novel—"that's just like me, I ..."—the reader is not trying to force the character to listen, of course, but is trying to force the literary character within the familiar grid of the reader's own self, seeing in the character only what the reader sees in herself, and seeing in herself only an image imitated from a model. This is narcissism, in every sense of the term, and even a kind of hysteria (D, 43), and definitely a kind of *ressentiment* in which the self affirms itself by negating what is not it, and seeks to subdue or capture the other. The movement here is from fixed term to fixed term, with the "self" as the "center," even though the self is formed through imitation of a model. Identification is assimilation of everything to the model, to "criteria that preexist for all time (to the infinity of time), so that it can neither apprehend what is new in an existing being, nor even sense the creation of a mode of existence" (CC, 135).

If there is a good way for the reader to "identify" with literature at all, it is by linking up with those forces in it that carry out "a cold and concerted destruction of the ego," and lead characters "far from [their] own country" (CC, 117). By finding affective and perceptual links with characters who are lost, who lose themselves, we can take up a broken line that cannot be retraced, extending a line of flight already begun elsewhere by someone or something else and which lead not just outside

of the ego, but beyond the human subject altogether, as when we enter into "the subjectivity of the milieu itself," with all its "qualities, substances, powers, and events: [such as] the street, ... with its materials (paving stones), its noises (cries of merchants), its animals (harnessed horses) or its dramas (a horse slips, a horse falls down, a horse is beaten)" (CC, 61). Mrs. Dalloway no longer judges or categorizes either others or herself ("She would not say of any one in the world now that they were this or were that.... She would not say of herself, I am this, I am that")¹⁰ because she has become indistinguishable from "life; London; this moment in June" (4) "outside looking on" (9) from the point of view of the life of London's streets: "somehow in the streets of London, on the ebb and flow of things, here, there, she survived" (9), "invisible; unseen; unknown" (11). Her "self" has entered into a "zone of indiscernibility" with London's streets on "this moment in June"; her life indistinguishable from that of the milieu, she perceives and feels from the point of view of the milieu, and has thereby journeyed far from her own country, even while remaining "at home" (see WIP, 169).

One does not have to journey far in space to journey far from self, and it is best to move "in place," in a "stationary flight of intensity" rather than the false freedom of movement in space¹¹—to be always away and on the way, in "the middle and not the beginning or the end" (D, 31). Although it is true that certain milieus lend themselves to journeys without fixed points of reference—the open sea, the desert—when Ahab perceives and feels from the point of view of the sea he inhabits with the whale, when T. E. Lawrence perceives and feels from the point of view of the desert he inhabits with the Arabs, they too lose themselves by merging with the subjectivity of the milieu, but no more and no less than does Mrs. Dalloway in the purely interior journey that dislocates the fixed landmarks of London and of her life. It is always a question of getting lost without being found again, of "becoming imperceptible" (WIP, 169; CC, 26, D, 45), and so to be able to find (*trouver*) something new, that is, really to *find* something, "under the ruins of [one's] devastated ego" (CC, 117), instead of just re-finding (*retrouver*) oneself.

There is no guarantee that a voyage without a destination will have a happy ending, for either the novelistic character or the reader. That is not the point. It would be a bit daft, anyway, to think that Ahab goes to sea the way Gilligan does, that Lawrence goes to the desert the way a hippie goes to Morocco, or that Mrs. Dalloway goes to London the way my daughter goes to the mall. These characters do not *choose* their voyages the way a consumer does at the travel agency; they are swept away by a line of flight that runs through them and takes them out of themselves, not by choice, but by necessity. Whether or not their ends are fatal, as sometimes happens, there is a fatality governing their

becomings: they *must* undertake these voyages out. Such voyages expose them to encounters with other forces—other people, milieus, land- and seascapes—that can enhance or decrease their powers of living; more precisely, encounters can increase an impersonal power of life that runs through them and beyond them, producing new effects and inventing new variations (D, 39–40, 49–50, 51–2, 57, 59–60).

Our role as readers is not to imitate these characters or their becomings, but to experiment with the intensities of affect and perception they release, searching for those that carry us off on our own lines of flight. In short, the reader's aim should be to experiment with the different possible encounters with the different aspects of the novel, seeking out those encounters that increase our power of life and which take us out of ourselves, a "process through which force enriches itself by seizing hold of other forces and joining itself to them in a new ensemble: a becoming" (CC, 132).

"Experiment, never interpret" (D, 48). Reading ought to be "a series of experiments for each reader in the midst of events that have nothing to do with books,"¹² and where books are themselves used as "an experimental machine, a machine for effects, as in physics."¹³ Both the reader and the book are composites in a system of relations expressing "a power of existing or acting,"¹⁴ and when two bodies' parts intermingle in such a way that their characteristic relations can be harmoniously combined, this results in an increase in their powers of existing, experienced affectively in a feeling of joy (CC, 148).¹⁵ Reading is "a kind of test ... a physical or chemical test, like that whereby workmen test the quality of some material" (EPS, 317), a test of the powers of the reader and the book at the moment of their encounter.

It is impossible to know in advance whether the encounter will turn out well for either party. In any experimental encounter the result is unforeseen and can just as well result in destruction as in an increase in power. Experimentation knows "nothing of meaning and aims," it is a "pure process that fulfills itself, and that never ceases to reach fulfillment at it proceeds,"¹⁶ "an impersonal process" bringing together different "voyagers and comers [*devenants*]" (CC, 66). There is always the risk of being destroyed by a life too strong for one, a risk undertaken first by the writer, whose "irresistible and delicate health" results from experiencing a life liberated from its imprisonment in man, organisms and genera (CC, 3), a vitality that provides a perspective on both health and illness, a "great health" (D, 5)¹⁷ that also bears witness to the writer's experience of "something in life that is too much for anyone, too much for themselves, and has put on them the quiet mark of death" (WIP, 172–3). But for the writer this risk, this voyage, is as necessary as it is for their characters. They must risk their lives for "the more than

personal life" to which they bear witness (CC, 45): "to write is to trace lines of flight which are not imaginary, and which indeed one is forced to follow" (D, 43). It is this involuntary openness to "nonorganic vitality ... the relation of the body to the imperceptible forces and powers that seize hold of it" (CC, 131) that makes great writers *grands vivants*, in and through the frail physical and psychological health that comes from being too weak for the life that runs through them (D, 50).

Writing is not a choice, but "the impossibility of another choice" (D, 51). "Without a set of impossibilities, you wouldn't have a line of flight, the exit that is creation," and a writer creates her own impossibilities in order to create a way out, but out of necessity, because these impossibilities grab her by the throat.¹⁸ Kafka, faced with the triple impossibility of not writing, of not writing in German (since like other Czech Jews, Kafka is not fluent in Czech, disdains Yiddish, and can only dream of the ancient and future language of Hebrew), and of writing in German (that "paper language" of the Imperial bureaucracy), is forced to invent a "minor" use of German within and against the "major" and official German of the Empire.¹⁹ Virginia Woolf, faced with the impossibility of living and the impossibility of not living, dissolves herself into her characters and her characters into their living milieu. In both cases, it is a matter of finding a way out. All the figures in Kafka—blocked passages, doors to nowhere, humans metamorphosing into animals, interminable "processes" (trials, *Prozessen*)—express the condition of a man caught like a rat in a maze, and whose only hope of escape is to *become* a rat: to think rat-wise, to adopt all the rat maneuvers. To avoid getting trapped, to escape: these are the vital imperatives of the writer, necessities, not choices.²⁰ The greatest trap is that of the self, and the greatest problem is "How can we rid ourselves of ourselves [*nous défaire de nous-mêmes*], and demolish ourselves?"²¹

For the reader, the same imperative obtains: "One must resist both of the traps, the one which offers us the mirror of contamination and identifications, and the one which points out to us the observation of the understanding" (D, 53), the traps of "Richard is me!" and of passing judgment on a work or its characters. Both operations keep us firmly within our own fixed reference points, our would-be timeless and fixed criteria of evaluation. But it is not a question of judging or misjudging, but of sensing whether other beings increase or diminish the impersonal power of life within us (CC, 135); "we can only assemble among assemblages" (D, 53), experimentally combine ourselves with others, and enter into a "becoming" along with them. Whatever the risks of getting lost, the risks of being broken by a "great health" or impersonal vitality are *necessary* risks. Whatever the risks, "all mistranslations are good—

always provided that ... they relate to the use of the book, that they multiply its use" (D, 5).

Novalis somewhere remarks that "philosophy is really homesickness; it is the urge to be at home everywhere,"²² and Georg Lukács, in his pre-Marxist days, decried that "transcendental homelessness" of the modern era. Deleuze finds in literature not "the literary form of the transcendental homelessness of the idea" but the antidote for this *Heimweh*.²³ Let's get lost: we have nothing to lose but ourselves.

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Notes

1. Gilles Deleuze, *Nietzsche* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1965), 20.
2. Deleuze, "L'immanence: une vie...", *Philosophie* 47 (September 1, 1995), cited in Daniel W. Smith, "'A Life of Pure Immanence': Deleuze's 'Critique et clinique' Project," the "Introduction" to Deleuze, *Essays Critical and Clinical*, trans. Daniel W. Smith and Michael A. Greco (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), xii–xiv. Hereafter cited as CC.
3. Gilles Deleuze and Claire Parnet, *Dialogues*, trans. Hugh Tomlinson and Barbara Habberjam (New York: Columbia University Press, 1987), 50. Hereafter cited as D.
4. Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *What is Philosophy?*, trans. Hugh Tomlinson and Graham Burchell (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994), 171. Hereafter cited as WIP.
5. Deleuze, *The Logic of Sense*, ed. Constantin Boundas, trans. Mark Lester and Charles Stivale (New York: Columbia University Press, 1990), 297; *Logique du sens* (Paris: Minuit, 1969), 345. Hereafter cited as LS.
6. Aristotle, *Poetics* 50b24–55a21, trans. Richard Janko (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1987), 10–22.
7. F. Scott Fitzgerald, *The Crack Up, with other Pieces and Stories* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1965), 52–3; cited in D, 38.
8. Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, trans. Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987), 173–4. Hereafter cited as ATP.

9. Milan Kundera, *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting*, trans. Michael Henry Heim (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1981), 79–80.
10. Virginia Woolf, *Mrs. Dalloway* (London: Penguin, 2000), 8–9. Further references will be given in parentheses in the text.
11. Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *Kafka: Toward a Minor Literature*, trans. Dana Polan (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986), 13.
12. Deleuze, *Negotiations*, trans. Martin Joughin (New York: Columbia University Press, 1995), 8–9.
13. Réda Bensmaïa, "Foreword" to Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *Kafka: Toward a Minor Literature*, xi.
14. Deleuze, *Expressionism in Philosophy: Spinoza*, trans. Martin Joughin (New York: Zone Books, 1990), 89–90. Hereafter cited as EPS.
15. See Deleuze, *Spinoza: Practical Philosophy*, trans. Robert Hurley (San Francisco: City Light Books, 1988), 40, 63–5.
16. Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, vol. 1, trans. Robert Hurley, Mark Seem, and Helen R. Lane (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1983), 370–1.
17. Deleuze, *Nietzsche*, 9–10.
18. Deleuze, *Negotiations*, 133.
19. Deleuze and Guattari, *Kafka*, 15–6, 20, 23.
20. *Ibid.*, 13.
21. Deleuze, *Cinema I: The Movement-Image*, trans. Hugh Tomlinson and Barbara Habberjam (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986), 66.
22. Cited by Georg Lukács, *History and Class Consciousness*, trans. Rodney Livingstone (Boston: MIT Press, 1971), 29.
23. Lukács, *Theory of the Novel*, trans. Anna Bostock (London: Merlin Press), 41, 121.