



Contemporary Philosophy

On Reading Valedictory Texts: Suicide Notes, Last Wills and Testaments

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ABSTRACT: Authorial absence of a literary and literal kind is my topic. I will examine the absence of nonliving authors, in particular the suicide and the ancestor. These authors author texts intended to be read only in their absence and only by specific, intended readers. Their texts are, respectively, the suicidal note and the last will or testament. Such texts are particularly sensitive to the problem of limited information, the potential for miscommunication, the inscrutability of authorial intention, and the real consequences to others of the author's irrevocable absence. Yet, however keenly aware these instruments are to their own authorial absence, can they defy Jacques Derrida's notion of language as 'play'? These texts of radical absence express a seriousness that refuses play. Yet do they become playfully ambiguous nonetheless? I explore this question by looking at the possibility for miscommunication in valedictory texts.

Authorial absence of a literary and literal kind is my topic. I will examine the absence of non-living authors, in particular the Suicide, and the Ancestor. For these authors author texts intended to be read *only* in their absence, and only by specific, intended readers. Their texts are, respectively, the suicide note, and the last will and testament. These texts are particularly sensitive to the problem of limited information, the potential for miscommunication, the inscrutability of authorial intention, and the real consequences to others of the author's irrevocable absence. Yet however keenly aware these instruments are to their own lack of authorial presence, can they defy Jacques Derrida's notion of language as "play?" These texts of radical absence express a seriousness that refuses play. Yet do they become playfully ambiguous nonetheless?

Suicide notes and last wills and testaments demand close, cautious reading. Such communication attempts are not going to be repeated by their absent authors. Both text forms seem to require one to continue the search for authorial intention and for original meaning in the text. The intended reader, the addressee of the serious, hopes that such texts can explain the author's full intended meaning. The reader is left with questions and anxiety at her own incomprehension of a text that is simultaneously radically open, because of the inevitable ambiguities of written language, and yet also radically closed, since the single authoritative source for confirmation, whose intentions with respect to language were hardly playful, is forever absent.

Valedictory (re)marks, whether desperate or orderly, cryptic or careful, are, both in the case of the suicide note and of the last will and testament, addressed to those for whom the absence will constitute a significant event. Whether undertaken as final burden, or as holy right, these careful words-become-documents complete the phrase — "Her last words to me were..." What must these last words be? (1)

When the dying do not acquit themselves, in writing, of the living, the latter feel a double absence, both of the person, once dead, and of her "*beau testament*." (2) It is a deprivation that the disappointed addressees often creatively seek to remedy, even to the point of coercing the last casual spoken words exchanged with the now-absent speaker until it renders a final valedictory message. (3)

Now consider the literary text. When one reads a literary text in order to discover the authorial intention, one has tacitly adopted the view that literary texts are, like valedictory texts, an expression of the authors dying wishes. But when one is reading a literary or philosophical text, one is not the explicitly intended addressee for the work in the same sense that one can be the addressee of a final statement or testament from a dying person well known to the addressee. For a reader to assume the privileged position of the reader for whom a (now) public text was (once) privately written is an act of appropriation necessary, perhaps, to the act of reading.

The textual valediction is written to explain the lives and the deaths of those about to die. One's last will and testament is a confessional narrative of a life in the same way that a suicide note is a narrative explanation of a death. The recipients of either of these private missives respond to them as if words that are final have a special capacity to express, with extraordinary economy and precision, the meaning of the past acts and desires of their authors. (4) It would seem that one cannot read the testamentary document without appeal to *Telos*, to *Logos*. (5)

The dying incur the responsibility of leaving a Will in force. If the potential testator accepts this legal, social and religious responsibility, she will address her remarks to a particular group of people, and in so doing, address the members of that group in ways that demonstrate some recognition of the particular interests she shares with them. For her audience is, by its very testamentary nature, well known to her.

Consider the case of the suicide note. Because a suicide's future "readers" are well known to her, the writer will likely make reference to a world shared with particular and familiar people. Given her anxiety in the face of her own impending death, the person contemplating suicide tries to make genuine and unambiguous contact with the familiar people from whom she intends to take her leave. As she plots her words, the faces of those she addresses come to mind, as do their most urgent questions. A suicide note is not merely a "text," properly so called. It signifies a relationship. It is a love letter, a hate letter, a lament, a message, a last shared word, the record of a deed, the record of a crime, an element in the "final ordeal." And insofar as this note-maker is writing for a particular and well known audience, the writing is pointed, persuasive, rhetorical.

And yet, because it *is* merely a text, the persuasion must fail, the explanation must leave questions, and the readers to whom the note intimately addresses itself must feel the ultimate incomprehension. The familiar is made strange. This written document would seem to have the very greatest opportunity to succeed: It is written to people grown well accustomed to each others verbal identities. But the stakes have been raised. The interchange has been terminated. A person is gone and only memory and word remain. The *word*, and not the person, has the last word now. (6)

Words crafted to give an unambiguous accounting by their now absent author begin to suggest subtle alternative meanings. Readers of testamentary documents consider the death itself as proof that every once-inconceivable-meaning has become possible. A plurality of meaning forms along the curves of economic supply and demand. By announcing an absence of the meaning's guarantor, a valediction creates a riot of demand. (7) One feels that surely every meaning one can find in the words of such an author was intended. (8) Thus, every remotely comprehensible reading of the suicide note, as well as some incomprehensible ones, become the possible meaning intended by its all-knowing author. For no author can be more omniscient than one who authors her own death.

As Kierkegaard argued, the task of the writer is to make understanding more, not less difficult. Similarly, Heidegger, in "What is Called Thinking," argues (as well he might) for the value of writing that is difficult to understand insofar as it makes greater demands upon the reader to fully participate in a meaning that is not provided *for* her, but accomplished *by* her. In this way, the reader of a difficult text might arrive at an understanding through much the same process as that undergone by the author. But the reader herself participates in the production of that difficulty insofar as she is a reader trained in over-reading. The reader of the difficult and the author of the difficult understand that to disambiguate undermines the value of difficulty. Therefore, the reader may choose to share in Kierkegaard's project of complicating understanding by the way she chooses to read the text. (9)

Testamentary texts attempt to accomplish the same task as the personal signature. (10) Through each, we attempt to make the absent (signator) present to the recipient, though the medium itself proves that the author is not present. (11) In the case of valedictory and testamentary texts, it is not an absence that is merely a "distant presence." That a Last Will and Testament is not legally binding without witnesses, that personal signatures must often be supplemented with other identity confirming materials, that suicides often are investigated for foul play even when a Note is in evidence... these are demonstrations of the general suspicion readers have that inscriptions can and do come "untethered" from their "origins." But explanations based on absence necessarily fail. The Living find explanations of death incomprehensible because they live on. Similarly, any "viaticum" addressed to the Dying must also fail to bridge that ultimate gap between the Living, who lack understanding of death, and the Dying, who lack life enough to live on.

The viaticum is part of the Christian Eucharist administered to the dying. But viaticum once referred to the provision of necessary supplies for an official journey of a Roman Magistrate. (12) Potentially terminal journeys require thought about when to depart, what to take, and whom to notify. Such journeys also require the traveler to secure what is not taken, to designate desired future uses for property, or to designate appropriate disposal. A journey made without telling others is not a journey. It is a *disappearance*. Disappearance is a rejection of narrative, a failure of explanation, a break with the natural, causal order. Disappearance is an unacceptable mode of becoming absent. Disappearance destroys connection to place and to others. It casts doubt on presence, on causality, and on Being itself. An unconfessed, unnarrated death throws doubt on life. (13) Disappearance is the stuff of magic, and the adversary of the explanation giving sciences. (14)

Not only does the Church and the Family desire words from the dying man, but so too the State. The legal penalty for dying intestate was once as severe as the penalty for dying at one's own hands. (15) Historically, dying in a condition of "aggravated intestacy" resulted in the confiscation of property and titles by the State, just as in cases of suicide. (16) Possession of property confers identity. Dying intestate was seen as a failure to express one's identity in terms of one's property, so resulted in its loss. Also lost was the right to legal, and spiritual, identity. An absent proprietor is judged negligent by the Church and the

State. (17) Questions about property and identity were once overseen by the Church, whose role was replaced by the State.

Property is the material benefit for entering into a social covenant with others. (18) By disregarding the covenant with others, one loses the property of the relational Proper. By failing to settle ones' material affairs before death, one violates the covenantal relation to others. (19) Both suicide notes and last wills and testaments reconfirm the relational covenants had with others. (20) Historically, the families too of the Suicide and the Intestate lost all status and all voice as a rebuke for the unnarrated disappearance of one of their kin. (21) They suffered both from incomprehension and grief, and from the social ignominy of an absence designated as illegal. (22) Suicide continues to be considered an unnatural, unholy, and unconfessed disappearance, and, as such, is a crime against the State. (23)

Greater than any of the punitive measures taken by the State is the problem of the absence of explanation, the absence of accounting, the absence of a word iterable and re-iterable. (24) We have seen that even when such an accounting is available, it's ambiguity can produce a silence and unresponsiveness as great as in the case of unnarrated disappearance. (25) When questioned, writing is silent. Though private, writing is made universally accessible. It has addressed too many, become public. It is the ghost that must roam the earth, and the orphan separated from its origin, denied its inheritance, as in the *Phaedrus*. Plato recognized that writing, abandoned by its author, is illegitimate. (26) Unlike living *logos* that is "founded on knowledge," writing cannot defend itself. It is helpless, saying the same thing over and over again. (27) Further, those orphaned marks can never be altered, never mature, never be other than in-that-state in which they were issued. (28) Recall Socrates' assessment of writing's dubious origin in the *Phaedrus* writing myth. Writing, offered by the gods as a way to improve memory, was rejected by the Egyptian King as artificial, exterior, and alien to true, internal memory. (29) Writing, said the King, is not an aid to memory but an aid to forgetting.

And yet we, the living, if not the dying themselves, demand writing from our Dead and Dying. Messages are converted into monuments. As monuments, these frozen messages from the Dead become immortal. But, as Plato knew, they are impotent, repetitious. (30) Monuments show an austere and imperious face to spectators. They are exteriority, and permanence, passivity and sign. (31) As monument, writing does not address only the select temporal and ideological group for whom it was written, for it becomes omnitemporal and legible to anyone at any time. (32) And just as writing in general stands accused of rendering its users more forgetful, these ghostly, written, monumental remains of the Dead also stand so accused.

So we now ask; if writing causes forgetfulness, as the Egyptian King of the *Phaedrus* writing myth feared, why, then, does the Church, the Family, and the State of the Dying Person demand that she *write* her testament? Testamentary writings are required *precisely in order for the living to forget*, rather than retain in live memory, the full content of the terrifying "final instrument." The last will, and even the suicide note, are instruments that exteriorize an otherwise interior absence. (33)

The desire to reserve the greatest possibility for successful message transmission for these most serious inscriptions of the Dying and the Dead has rendered documents inscribed by them immune from the critical analysis to which exegetical readers submit other linguistic texts. Perhaps we cannot give this privilege to testamentary and valedictory texts. For all texts become testamentary. Readers who recognize ambiguity and play-at-work will explore the plurality of their meanings, treating all inscriptions as inscriptions. Such readers apply Lacan's insight to the written valediction and conclude that, "*You reading the suicide note is the suicide note reading you.*"

What, then, can one determine from reading testamentary texts? Some would maintain that the intended addressees of such texts possess privileged insights into the meaning of the text that are unavailable to non-designated readers. (34) But given that privilege, why does such incomprehension and ambiguity arise? I have suggested that the perceived significance of valedictory and testamentary texts produce a heightened anxiety about their intended meanings that results in meaning's proliferation. The valedictory and testamentary texts, thereby, begin to resemble more and more, the literary and philosophical texts from which they have been traditionally and respectfully distinguished. Despite every effort to achieve precision, despite the most rigorously technical legal formulas for Will making, despite the deadly seriousness with which final farewells are composed, their recipients are left with uncertainty. But why does even this most serious and cautious of writing produce this effect? (35) The written words of the dead are at once terrifyingly final, closed, yet subject to endless exegesis. How can one decide on a single meaning when confronted with many possible meanings for a text of such great consequence? (36)

Now, an end-note to Plato. Western philosophy begins with Plato's reconstruction of the dead Socrates, of his words, and of his final words. Consider Socrates' enigmatic final utterance, as reported by Plato: "*Crito, we owe a cock to Asclepius; make this offering to him and do not forget.*" (37) Platonic exegetes disagree about the meaning of this final remark. What is the true meaning of Socrates' dying words? Can we treat them as testamentary even though they were (recorded as) uttered rather than written by his own hand? (38) While the final utterance reported as belonging to Socrates may belong to Socrates, the written text does not. Rather, it comes to us from a Plato who is aware that he betrays what he writes, as he writes.

Plato's self-deconstructing disavowals of writing show a Plato conflicted by the decision to write, who understood it to be an aid to forgetting rather than an aid to memory. Plato's own predisposition for writing was a predictor of his fascination for Socrates' death by poison and death by writing. (39)

Plato knew that just as all medicine poisons as it heals, there is no harmless cure for forgetting. Plato chose to administer the medicinal *pharmakon* of writing, which poisons as it heals. By the logic of the *pharmakon*, writing poisons memory and aids forgetting. (40) Yet Plato considered remembering vital to the acquisition of knowledge. Plato was forced to choose between keeping the wisdom of Socrates alive in his own living, interior memory, or to exteriorize it in the act of inscription. (41)

In writing the farewell message of Socrates, Plato consigned himself to passive exteriority. He exiled himself thereby from Reality as can be known only to living memory. In order to write, Plato had to turn away from fulfilling his desire for an absolute, living, interior knowledge of the Ultimate Truths. Plato entrusted his final message to the *pharmakon* of writing that poisons as it heals. When Plato decided to become a chronicler, he betrayed health for illness, original for copy, fertility for sterility, (42) transcendence for immanence. By recording the living, Plato turned from deed to inscription, and from life to death. (43) He entered thereby the realm of symptoms and monuments. And he entered the realm of valedictory texts.

Socrates' final words were not spoken by him. (44) They became, however, a verbal palimpsest which Plato would first inscribe then re-inscribe. (45) By inscribing the final words of Socrates, Plato betrayed his own philosophical project in an act of self-diagnosis, self-contamination, self-deconstruction, and self-destruction. (46) And in the act of writing the valediction of Socrates, Plato wrote his own valediction. The last words of Socrates were to become the last testament and valediction of Plato as he turned from the dream of full presence to the indeterminacy and forgetfulness of the *pharmakon*.

I give the last words on last words to Derrida.

All graphemes are of a testamentary essence. (47)

Notes

(1) What is this text called "Good-bye?" "Farewell?" In this context, these written valedictions are closer to the French "Adieu," rather than the temporary absence signalled by "Au revoir" or "A bientôt." An hermeneutic of absence might begin here, at the point of intentional, recorded (written) departure, at the valedictory (re)marks made by those who know that their absence will soon be felt.

(2) "'*Le beau testament*' — the bravura piece written in the evening of one's life for one's own edification and that of one's children." Philippe Aries, *The Hour of Our Death*, Penguin Books, Knopf Inc., 1981, p. 200

(3) Consider the fury of Hamlet when he discovered that his Father was actively deprived, by that infamous fraternal intervention, both of his life and of the chance to verbally acquit himself of his life. That the soul of Hamlet's Father remained unconfessed constituted as serious a tragedy for Hamlet as the actual loss of life. And what of Hamlet's "disordered mind?" Did he "see" the ghost of his Father and "hear" his confession? Or was it pure desire? When understanding was lacking, and the desire to understand was great, did Hamlet create a supplement to an already closed text?

(4) As Philippe Aries, French historian of death and dying writes, "Heaven and Hell...are present at this final ordeal that is being given to the dying man, an ordeal whose outcome will determine the meaning of his whole life... the dying man has the power to win or lose everything...There is no question of evaluating the life as a whole until after its conclusion, and this depends on the outcome of the final ordeal that he must undergo *in hora mortis*." Aries, *The Hour of Our Death*, pg.109

(5) Derrida describes the traditional view of Logos as, "a living, animate creature (which) is also engendered. An organism; a differentiated body *proper*, with a center and extremities, joints, a head, and feet...(H)aving been engendered, it must have a beginning and an end." Derrida, *Dissemination*, "Plato's Pharmacy," University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1981, p. 79-80. See also Socrates in Phaedrus 264b-c, "But to this you will surely agree: every discourse (logon), like a living creature, should be so put together that it has its own body and lacks neither head nor foot, neither middle nor extremities, all composed in such a way that they suit both each other and the whole."

(6) "One writes in order to communicate something to those who are absent. (It is) the absence of the sender, of the receiver [destinateur], from the mark that he abandons, and which cuts itself off from him and continues to produce effects independently of his presence and of the present actuality of his intentions [vouloir dire], indeed even after his death, his absence which moreover belongs to the structure of all writing — and I shall add further on, of all language in general." Jacques Derrida, *Limited Inc.*, "Signature, Event, Context," Northwestern University Press, Evanston, Ill., Translation copyright 1988, p. 5

(7) The plurality of meanings to be found in these texts of double-absence might also be due to the gradual deification and vilification that develops around the dead, and especially so around the self-annihilator. By exercising his freedom so completely, has the Suicide not expressed his human freedom to the (forbidden) point of becoming divine, at least in our poor understanding of what divinity might be? And if we judge that last destructive act of freedom to be more demonic than divine, does it not regain the full, though negatively

described, mystery of an omnipotent defector? The Suicide abandons the living. He defects and is judged defective.

(8) However, one does not have any reason to believe this author to be a benevolent one, unlike St. Augustine's Divine Author, so the ambiguity of meaning is hated by us rather than loved. While the plural meaning of a text authored by the Divine is viewed as so much the richer for that plurality, the human author, no matter how deified through his absence, suffers only impoverishment from ambiguity insofar as we demand explicit and literal meaning from him. For contrary to Augustine, and due to the suspicion with which contemporary readers view the "literal " meaning of the text, even the most divine of human authors, the absent dead, cannot communicate a message so unambiguous that a perfect transmission occurs. In fact, contemporary criticism's heightened sensitivity to the incidence of "infelicitous speech acts" has resulted in a curious reversal of Augustine's paradigm. For now, literal, univocal, and absolute meaning could only belong to God, and man is cursed, rather than blessed, with the plurality of meaning that was once consider the mark of the Divine. Augustine would accuse modern readers of indulging in a dangerous intellectual vanity when they are arguing for the plurality of meaning in texts authored by human authors. For Augustine, such texts can have only a literal sense. But if we examine Augustine's position, we see that it is as concerned with the *intentionality* as with the *number* of simultaneous meanings, if not more so. Human authors can only *intend* a single, literal meaning, while God can and does *intend* all possible levels of textual meaning that are discovered in His Texts. Those "vanishing disturbances of air" and "marks on paper" are corruptible, but meant to remind us of God's meaning. Human authors produce the Letter of the text, which is conventionally defined, but only God can infuse the Letter with Spirit. Perhaps as a result of the influence that Augustine continues to exercise, modern exegetes recall that man is permitted to intend only a single, literal meaning. But trained as they are in reading Biblical texts rich with a Divine multiplicity of meaning, they prefer to suppress interest in any human author in order to better listen for possible Divine meanings, for possible traces of God in the human textual effluvia. A return to the simple literal meaning of a text by focusing on its human origin would thereby seriously impoverish the exegetical experience *per se*, and prevent the "still, quiet Voice" from becoming audible. Thus they abandon the conventional meaning for the figural meaning. Without disavowing authorial intention, readers discover multiple readings at their great spiritual peril. Thus, long after texts have ceased to be considered collaborations with the Divine, readers can only continue to deny that human authors can intend multiple meanings by focusing their attention away from that intention altogether. If this is how man gradually attained figural meaning for human texts, what has happened to the literal, conventional level of textual meaning? In a reversal of Augustine, the literal meaning of a text has been denied to man and made sanctified. Human authors have exchanged *intentionality* for *plurality* of meaning. In so doing, they have returned the literal level of textual meaning to the status of Divine. Reading the Holy has taught readers to desire obscure and difficult meanings from all inscriptions. But when they do so, they leave the literal forever. Trained in over-reading, in reading symbol as allegory, readers no longer have the bond with the literal meaning upon which all possible significations once depended.

(9) Plato records Socrates as having said that "to express oneself badly is not only faulty as far as the language goes, but does some harm to the soul." (*Phaedo* 115e) But if the ambiguous meaning of Socrates' own final message to his friends was not due to poor expression, was he, then, saying something difficult? Was Christ saying something "difficult" when he said "My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?" These last words were not given as written, nor do we consider either case to be a suicide, unless one includes in that company all who die without struggling against death's approach. Though not self-induced, these were voluntary deaths. Each accepted death, but did they invite it? We pore over such last words to "divine" their true meanings. We want explanations. We treat the valedictory as especially freighted. Perhaps it explains everything. Perhaps it expresses a person's very essence. But the search for essences within a text finds neither essence nor text in the plurality of possible meanings.

(10) "Where there is not in the verbal formula of the utterance, a reference to the person doing the uttering, and so the acting, by means of the pronoun 'I' (or by his personal name), then in fact he will be 'referred to' in one of two ways: a) in verbal utterances, *by his being the person who does* the uttering — what we may call the utterance — *origin* which is used generally in any system of verbal reference-co-ordinates. b) In written utterances (or 'inscriptions'), *by his appending his signature* (this has to be done because, of course, written utterances are not tethered to their origin in the way spoken ones are.)" J. L. Austin, *How To Do Things With Words*, p. 60-61

(11) "By definition, a written signature implies the actual or empirical non-presence of the signer." Derrida, "Signature, Event, Context," p. 20

(12) It was the material "Fare Thee Well" given to the traveler. It has become part of the Christian Eucharist, the ritual which blesses, narrates and confesses the death of a believer. Whether considered an essential preparation for death, as it was by Hamlet, or as optional, as some readings of Socrates' dying words suggest, one senses that preparations must be made for the final "viaticus."

(13) As was the case for Hamlet when his Father died so suddenly and so inexplicably.

(14) "Science and magic, the passage between life and death, the supplement to evil and to lack: the privileged domain of Thoth had finally to be medicine. All his powers are summed up and find employment there. The god of writing, who knows how to put an end to life, can also heal the sick. And even the dead... The god of writing is thus also a god of medicine. Of medicine: both a science and an occult drug. Of the remedy and the poison. The god of writing is the god of *pharmakon*." Derrida, "Plato's Pharmacy," p. 94

(15) There are rare eras in which suicide was considered a legal practice. However, it was usually necessary to seek permission from the State. Alvarez notes that, "Classical Greek suicide, then, was dictated by a calm, though slightly excessive reasonableness. In Athens, as in the Greek colonies of Marseille and Ceos,...the magistrates kept a supply of poison for those who wished to die. All that was required was that they should first plead their cause before the Senate and obtain official permission." See A. Alvarez, from *Suicide; The Philosophical Issues*, "The Background," p. 20

(16) Historically, in some cases, whether or not the Suicide had legally acquitted himself of his property, the family was denied any right to the inheritance, and was sometimes punished with incarceration as well. It was as if the Suicide had died in a state of aggravated intestacy, leaving everything, including his family, in the improper condition of having lost proper identity.

(17) Aries writes that, "The Will was also a "laissez-passer," or permit, for use on earth. As such it legitimized and authorized the enjoyment — otherwise suspect — of property acquired during a lifetime, the *temporalia*" Aries, *The Hour of Our Death*, p. 191

(18) "When the Will reappeared as a common practice in the twelfth century, it had ceased to be what it had been in roman antiquity, and what it would become again at the end of the eighteen century: simply a private legal document intended to regulate the transmission of property. It was primarily a religious document, required by the Church even of the poorest persons. It was regarded as a sacramental, like holy water; the Church enforced its use, making it obligatory under pain of excommunication. Wills were drafted and preserved by the curate as well as by the notary. It was not until the sixteenth century that they became the exclusive responsibility of the notary, and for a long time cases involving wills continued to be referred to church courts...This explains why until the middle of the eighteenth century, the will consists of two equally important parts: first, the pious clause; and next, the distribution of the inheritance." Aries, *The Hour of Our Death*, p. 189

(19) Karen Lebacqz and H. Tristram Engalhardt Jr. argue that suicide is a *prima facie* right, except when it violates one's "covenantal relation with others." "Suicide is wrong when it violates obligations of covenant-fidelity." From *Suicide; The Philosophical Issues*, "Suicide and Covenant," p. 85

(20) In Aries' extensive record of practices and rituals associated with death and dying in the West, he records that "In 1736 the pious author of an eighteenth-century *artes moriende* entitled *Methode chretienne pour finir sa vie* (asks), "What does a sick man do when he sees he is in danger of dying? He sends for a confessor and a notary." That the two are equally necessary seems quite extraordinary in a manual on the art of dying, which teaches detachment and contempt for the world." A confessor, to put the affairs of his conscience in order, and a notary, to draw up his will." With the help of these two persons, the sick man must do three things; The first is to confess; the second, to take Communion. "The third thing that a dying man does to prepare himself to appear before the judgement of God is to settle his temporal affairs as best he can, to make sure that everything is in order, and to dispose of all his property." Note that it is not a question of human precaution, an act of prudence and world wisdom, like the taking out of a life insurance policy, but of a religious, almost sacramental act, and that performing it is a prerequisite for eternal salvation." Aries, *The Hour of Our Death*, p. 196

(21) Until the middle of the eighteen century, "Anyone who died intestate could not, in principle, be buried in a church or cemetery." Aries, *The Hour of Our Death*, p. 189

(22) "...the last recorded degradation of the corpse of a suicide took place in 1823." In both France until 1791, and England until 1870, the bodies were degraded, the nobility lost all titles and all property was taken by the crown. Alvarez from *Suicide; The Philosophical Issues*, p. 8,9

- (23) England's Suicide Act decriminalized suicide only in 1961. Today, suicide is considered a form of mental illness, or criminal insanity, and is punished by mandatory psychiatric hospitalization.
- (24) "A writing that is not structurally readable — iterable — beyond the death of the addressee would not be writing." Derrida, "Signature, Event, Context," p. 7
- (25) "Writing is not an independent order of signification; it is weakened speech, something not completely dead: a living-dead, a reprieved corpse, a deferred life, a semblance of breath. The phantom; the phantasm, the simulacrum of living discourse is not inanimate; it is not insignificant; it simply signifies little, and always the same thing. This signifier of little, this discourse that doesn't amount to much is like all ghosts: errant..." Derrida in "Plato's Pharmacy," p. 143
- (26) "It always needs its father to attend to it, being quite unable to defend itself or to attend to its own needs." (Phaedrus 275e) Derrida writes of this orphaned Logos that "In contrast to writing, living *logos* is alive in that it has a living father (whereas the orphan is already half dead), a father that is *present*, *standing* near it, behind it, within it, sustaining it with his rectitude, attending it in person in his own name." "Plato's Pharmacy," p. 77
- (27) Phaedrus 276d-277d
- (28) Plato writes, "No intelligent man will ever be so bold as to put into language those things which his reason has contemplated especially not into a form that is inalterable — which must be the case with what is expressed in written symbols." Seventh Letter 343a: cf. also Laws XII, 968d
- (29) "The king of Thebes received in his city the god Theuth, who had invented numbers, geometry, astronomy, games of chance, and grammata or written characters. Questioned about the power and possible benefits of his invention, Theuth claims that the knowledge of written characters would make Egyptians wiser and more capable of preserving the memory of things. No, replies the king, souls will become more forgetful once they have put their confidence in external marks instead of relying on themselves from within. This "remedy" (pharmakon) is not reminiscence, but sheer remembrance. As to instruction, what this invention brings is not the reality, but the semblance of it; not wisdom, but its appearance." Ricoeur, *Interpretation Theory: Discourse and the Surplus of Meaning*, p. 38
- (30) As are memorial statuary, gravestones, porticos, etc.
- (31) "Instead of quickening life in the original, 'in person,' the *pharmakon* can at best only restore its monuments. It is a debilitating poison for memory, but a remedy or tonic for its external sign, its *symptoms*...writing belongs to the order and exteriority of the symptom." Derrida, "Plato's Pharmacy," p. 110
- (32) "The omnitemporality of the meaning is what opens it to unknown readers. Hence the historicity of reading is the counterpart of this specific omnitemporality; since the text has escaped its author and his situation, it has also escaped its original addressee. Hence it may provide itself with new readers. This widening of the range of readers is the consequence of the initial transgression of the first event into the universality of sense." Ricoeur, *Interpretation Theory: Discourse and the Surplus of Meaning*, p. 93
- (33) And it is because writing displaces what was interior that Plato rejects writing. As Derrida explains, "(w)hat Plato is attacking in the sophistics, therefore, is not simply recourse to memory, but, within such recourse, the substitution of the mnemonic device for live memory...substituting the passive, mechanical "by-heart" for the active reanimation of knowledge, for its reproduction in the present." Derrida, "Plato's Pharmacy," p. 108
- (34) One must wonder whether intended inscriptions from those about to die can ever be "felicitous" in J. L. Austin's sense. Because valedictory utterances of the variety of the last will and testament and the suicide note are clearly "words that do things," they must surely qualify as "Performative Utterances," or, utterances which commit the utterer to a new ontological status simply by virtue of their successful transmission. But just as Derrida shows in the case of Performative Utterances, all such successful acts of communication depend for their very existence on the possibility of failure. Thus, the last will and the suicide note too must suffer, as all Performatives must and do, from the "infelicities" of "etiolated" speech.
- (35) As Jasper Neel writes, and contrary to *Phaedrus* 275d, "Reread texts do not say the same thing over and over again." Jasper Neel, *Plato, Derrida, and Writing*, Southern Illinois University Press, Carbondale, 1988, p. 24

(36) Ricoeur has argued that one must "guess" and then seek to validate one's guess. Ricoeur's notion of "guess," coupled with Derrida's notion of "play," is an exegetical method that informs readers of the dead.

(37) *Phaedo* 188a

(38) In another paper, I consider 36 possible interpretations of Socrates' final utterance in order to demonstrate the extent to which uncertainty and ambiguity trouble valedictory texts.

(39) What great pathos did Plato feel for the master who died by the quick drought of poison? Did Plato see his own fate played out on that day when he decided that he too would take in the poison of the *pharmakon* of writing? Was Plato's decision to return to his earlier profession of writing due to his own absence at Socrates' death? Why was Plato absent? What was the illness Plato suffering from that day?

(40) As Derrida explains, Plato understood that, "(i)nstead of quickening life in the original, 'in person,' the *pharmakon* can at best only restore its monuments. It is a debilitating poison for memory, but a remedy or tonic for its external sign, its *symptoms*...writing belongs to the order and exteriority of the symptom." Derrida, "Plato's Pharmacy," p. 110

(41) "In all the cycles of Egyptian mythology, Thoth presides over the organization of the dead." Derrida, "Plato's Pharmacy," p. 92. Since Plato knew the myth of Thoth as inventor of writing, he might well have known this about Thoth.

(42) "The conclusion of the *Phaedrus* is less a condemnation of writing in the name of present speech than a preference for one sort of writing over another, for the fertile trace over the sterile trace, for a seed that engenders because it is planted inside over a seed scattered wastefully outside: at the risk of dissemination." Derrida, "Plato's Pharmacy" p. 149 — The masturbatory quality of writing is clear here.

(43) One might here be reminded of the insight had by Sartre's Roquentin in *Nausea*. "Live or tell."

(44) Perhaps Socrates understood that Plato's days as playwright were not over, and that the drama of Socrates' death would be a temptation too great for the erstwhile bard to refuse. Perhaps Socrates also foresaw the challenge to Plato's own philosophy that the temptation to write represented. Perhaps Socrates cultivated Plato's company in the hope that Plato would become beguiled enough to poison himself by writing while Socrates could remain stoically heroic and uncompromised by writing. How much one considers Socrates to have known about Plato's future betrayal of his own values through writing is limited only by one's generosity, imagination, or creative recklessness.

(45) As Barthes writes, "the birth of the reader must be at the cost of the death of the Author." Roland Barthes, *Image, Music, Text*, "The Death of The Author," The Noonday Press, N.Y., 1977, p. 148

(46) "Writing is that neutral, composite, oblique space where our subject slips away, the negative where all identity is lost, starting with the very identity of the body writing." Barthes, "The Death of The Author," p. 142

(47) Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, p. 9