

# The Death of the Reader: Meaning in the Era of Digital Narcissism

**Massimo Leone**

University of Turin, Italy

风雨嗟何及，  
江湖涕泫然。

(Tu Fu, 哭李尚书(之芳), lines 7-8)<sup>1</sup>

## *Abstract*

Roland Barthes's famous essay on the "Death of the Author" inaugurated an intense reflection on the progressive dwindling of the importance of the traditional biographic idea of "author" in the activity of receiving and interpreting a text, especially a literary one. In the new epistemic era favored by the emergence and affirmation of structuralism, the meaning of a text was, indeed, no longer seen as stemming from an individual agency but from the social dimensions of language and culture. As digital communication is progressively supplanting many forms of non-digital meaning transmission, though, present-day semiospheres are confronted with a different scenario: on the one hand, "empirical" authors are actually becoming more and more prominent, meaning that audiences are starving for non-digital and "auratic" experiences of encounter with meaning, minding more meeting with authors, for instance, than reading their novels; on the other hand, given the easiness of meaning production with digital technology, the same cultures are going through a progressive "agony of the reader": individuals are so intent in creating new particles of meaning, with impatient and daily frenzy, that they never become patient readers of other people's meaning creations, especially if these challenge the instantaneousness that characterizes the contemporary digital communication. The shortness of present-day meaning creation and its lack of audience is bound to change the entire semiosphere. The essay aims at foreseeing some of these changes, pinpointing one of the main features of Narcissism in the digital era.

**Keywords:** *semiotics, author, reader, work, digital communication*

## 1. In Praise of Ignorance

The main contention of this paper is that a certain degree of ignorance is necessary in order for an artist to achieve aesthetic greatness.

Ignorance, however, must not concern the technical means by which the artistic text is to be constructed: the artist, on the contrary, must master the appropriate creative skills to the utmost extent; the idea according to which outstanding results in the arts could be achieved without excelling in the mastery over the required language is clearly a misconception: even those artists who make a name for themselves by disrupting the creative habits of their epoch must and can do so only if they minutely know them.

The object of the artist's ignorance cannot concern the semantic domain of creation either: as Argentinian writer and poet Jorge Luis Borges (1932) used to say, one can become a great writer for what one writes about or for how one writes about it. Usually, the greatest literary creators of all times were outstanding in both areas: they wrote about something new and they did it in a new way. In any case, for those who choose not to break any aesthetic rules as well as for the rebellious artists, it is paramount that they have an intimate knowledge of the semantic field in which their creation is to be proposed, be it in relation to the domain of historical reality, existential fiction, or psychological investigation.

The ignorance that an artist needs, on the opposite, is of a different kind: it concerns neither the skills nor the domain of creation but the audience to which the artistic text is to be addressed. This ignorance can be described and analyzed in semiotic terms. One of the most relevant contributions of semiotics to the knowledge of the process of signification, communication, and interpretation has coincided with an understanding that this process is seldom immediate, direct, and transparent. It is more often mediated, indirect, and opaque, especially as regards artistic creation. Insights about the nature of this process were already somehow part of Roman Jakobson's (1963) understanding of language and communication: the sender and the receiver are in contact through a message, but this message is not autonomous from the code in and through which it is created: ignorance of the code inevitably implies, already in Jakobson's formulation, the impossibility of correctly interpreting the message.

Nevertheless, Jakobson's model of language and communication is still significantly influenced by Shannon and Weaver's modeling of information transmission, a model that was extremely influential in the history of linguistics, semiotics, and communication studies, but that was fundamentally a non-semiotic model, meaning that it would not entail any interpretation whatsoever. It was, on the contrary, with Umberto Eco's reformulation of Jakobson's semiotics, also in relation to Charles S. Peirce's philosophy of signs and meaning, that ignorance became a much more relevant element in the mysterious and fascinating dynamics that allows two or more human minds to share their contents. In his 1975 treatise of general semiotics, Umberto Eco proposed one of the wittiest definitions of the discipline as being essentially centered on studying everything that can be used to

lie. Information models implicitly exclude this possibility, for they rule out any role for truthful semiotic interpretation.

Eco then applied this idea of signification as intrinsically ambiguous phenomenon to the literary domain: it is in literature, in particular, that one realizes the intrinsic opaqueness of human communication: the empirical author of a novel exists, he or she has an ontological status; Hemingway, for instance, is not only a textual author but also a physical persona, someone with whom one might have shared a drink in a bar of Paris, Havana, or Venice. In the same way, readers of Hemingway's novels also exist ontologically, as physical personae who hold a book or a tablet in their hands, sit here or there, feel enthralled or fatigued, drink a glass of water from time to time, etc.

The point that Umberto Eco has stressed through many of his essays is that, in writing as well as in reading, these two physical personae do not meet directly, and probably, as this essay will contend, should never meet, lest the deepest value of the literary creation be somehow annihilated. As the Italian semiotician proposed in *Lector in Fabula* [in English: *The Role of the Reader*, 1979], one of his most important theoretical books, on the one hand the author creates the text having in mind a certain vague and abstract idea of its potential readership. Hemingway did not write for anyone in particular but for an abstract group of readers who, at his time as well as in subsequent epochs, would be willing to cooperate with the interpretive play proposed by his texts. The empirical reader, on the other hand, does not usually come into direct contact with the empirical author but shapes an image of it through the textual interpretation itself. The intentionality of the artwork, therefore, takes precedence on both that of the author and that of the reader, imposing itself as the necessary semiotic interface that, on the one side, allows the author to shape a text for an unknown or scarcely known readership and, on the other side, allows readers to conjure in their minds an abstract idea of the author, based not on personal knowledge of his or her persona but on intimate experience of the text.

In this essay I would like to propose that the more a creative genre entails an aesthetic dimension, the more it must rely on dark ignorance on both sides: the author must be intimately ignorant as regards his or her readers, while the latter must be deeply ignorant about the former. The degree of ignorance required in textual creation, indeed, heavily depends on the style, the format, and above all, the genre in which such creation is framed. There is a very peculiar genre of writing that in Italian has an ironic name; it is called "bugiardino", that is, literally, "little liar". The name is ironic for this text is not meant to lie at all. It is, indeed, the usually very concise text that one finds in medicaments, describing their chemical nature, the illness(es) that they are supposed to be able to treat, their posology, that is, the way in which they should be taken, and, of course, the usually terrifying section on their side-effects. Here is an example, the instruction leaflet of one of the most commonly available drugs, the Aspirine (Fig. 1):

Fig. 1

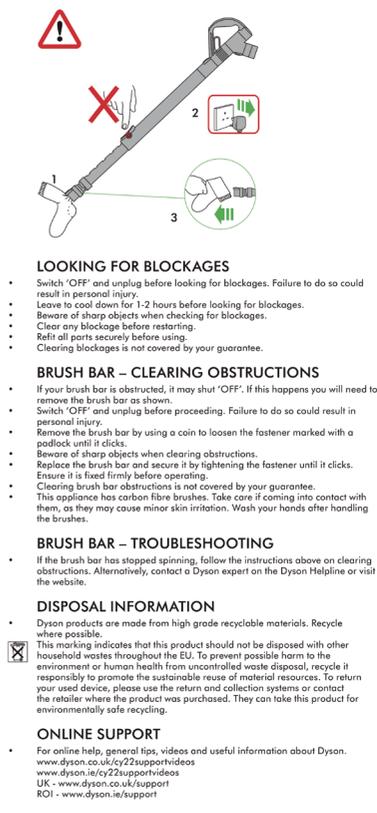


**Genuine Bayer® Aspirin Tablets**

<b>Drug Facts</b>	
<b>Active ingredient (in each tablet)</b>	<b>Purposes</b>
Aspirin 325 mg (NSAID)*.....	Pain reliever/fever reducer
*nonsteroidal anti-inflammatory drug	
<b>Uses</b>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>temporarily relieves minor aches and pains due to:                             <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>headache</li> <li>muscle pain</li> <li>toothache</li> <li>menstrual pain</li> <li>colds</li> <li>minor pain of arthritis</li> </ul> </li> <li>temporarily reduces fever</li> </ul>	
<b>Warnings</b>	
<p><b>Reye's syndrome:</b> Children and teenagers who have or are recovering from chicken pox or flu-like symptoms should not use this product. When using this product, if changes in behavior with nausea and vomiting occur, consult a doctor because these symptoms could be an early sign of Reye's syndrome, a rare but serious illness.</p> <p><b>Allergy alert:</b> Aspirin may cause a severe allergic reaction which may include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>hives</li> <li>facial swelling</li> <li>asthma (wheezing)</li> <li>shock</li> </ul> <p><b>Stomach bleeding warning:</b> This product contains an NSAID, which may cause severe stomach bleeding. The chance is higher if you</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>are age 60 or older</li> <li>have had stomach ulcers or bleeding problems</li> <li>take a blood thinning (anticoagulant) or steroid drug</li> <li>take other drugs containing prescription or nonprescription NSAIDs (aspirin, ibuprofen, naproxen, or others)</li> <li>have 3 or more alcoholic drinks every day while using this product</li> <li>take more or for a longer time than directed</li> </ul>	
<b>Do not use</b>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>if you are allergic to aspirin or any other pain reliever/fever reducer</li> <li>if you have ever had an allergic reaction to this product or any of its ingredients</li> </ul>	
<b>Ask a doctor before use if</b>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>stomach bleeding warning applies to you</li> <li>you have a history of stomach problems, such as heartburn</li> <li>you have high blood pressure, heart disease, liver cirrhosis, or kidney disease</li> <li>you are taking a diuretic</li> <li>you have asthma</li> </ul>	
<b>Ask a doctor or pharmacist before use if you are taking a prescription drug for</b>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>gout</li> <li>diabetes</li> <li>arthritis</li> </ul>	
<b>Stop use and ask a doctor if</b>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>an allergic reaction occurs. Seek medical help right away.</li> <li>you experience any of the following signs of stomach bleeding:                             <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>feel faint</li> <li>vomit blood</li> <li>have bloody or black stools</li> <li>have stomach pain that does not get better</li> </ul> </li> <li>pain gets worse or lasts more than 10 days</li> <li>fever gets worse or lasts more than 3 days</li> <li>redness or swelling is present</li> <li>new symptoms occur</li> <li>ringing in the ears or a loss of hearing occurs</li> </ul>	

Only a heavily deconstructionist approach could detect an aesthetic value whatsoever in a text of this kind or in similar purely instructive texts, like the instructions that one finds together with new vacuum cleaners or microwaves (Fig. 2: Excerpt from the instructions leaflet of a Dyson vacuum cleaner).

Fig. 2



**GUARANTEE TERMS AND CONDITIONS**

**DYSON CUSTOMER CARE**

**THANK YOU FOR CHOOSING TO BUY A DYSON APPLIANCE**

After registering your 5 year guarantee, your Dyson appliance will be covered for parts and labour for 5 years from the date of purchase, subject to the terms of the guarantee. If you have any questions about your Dyson appliance, call the Dyson Helpline with your serial number and details of where/when you bought the appliance. Most questions can be solved over the phone by one of our trained Dyson Helpline staff. Alternatively, visit [www.dyson.com](http://www.dyson.com) for online help, general tips and useful information about Dyson.

If your Dyson appliance needs a service, call the Dyson Helpline so we can discuss the available options. If your Dyson appliance is under guarantee, and the repair is covered, it will be repaired at no cost.

**PLEASE REGISTER AS A DYSON APPLIANCE OWNER**

To help us ensure you receive prompt and efficient service, please register as a Dyson appliance owner. There are two ways to do this:

- Online at [www.dyson.com](http://www.dyson.com)
  - Telephone the Dyson Helpline.
- This will confirm ownership of your Dyson appliance in the event of an insurance loss, and enable us to contact you if necessary.

**LIMITED 5 YEAR GUARANTEE**

**TERMS AND CONDITIONS OF THE DYSON 5 YEAR LIMITED GUARANTEE.**

**WHAT IS COVERED**

- The repair or replacement of your Dyson machine (at Dyson's discretion) if it is found to be defective due to faulty materials, workmanship or function within 5 years of purchase or delivery (if any part is no longer available or out of manufacture Dyson will replace it with a functional replacement part).
- Where this machine is sold outside of the EU, this warranty will only be valid if the appliance is used in the country in which it was sold.
- Where this machine is sold within the EU, this warranty will only be valid (i) if the appliance is used in the country in which it was sold or (ii) if the appliance is used in Austria, Belgium, France, Germany, Ireland, Italy, Netherlands, Spain or the United Kingdom and the same model as this appliance is sold at the same voltage rating in the relevant country.

**WHAT IS NOT COVERED**

- Dyson does not guarantee the repair or replacement of a product where a defect is the result of:
  - Accidental damage, faults caused by negligent use or care, misuse, neglect, carelessness or operation or handling of the appliance which is not in accordance with the Dyson Operating Manual.
  - Use of the appliance for anything other than normal domestic household purposes.
  - Use of parts not assembled or installed in accordance with the instructions of Dyson.
  - Use of parts and accessories which are not genuine Dyson components.
  - Faulty installation (except where installed by Dyson).
  - Repairs or alterations carried out by parties other than Dyson or its authorised agents.
  - Blockages – please refer to the Dyson Operating Manual for details of how to look for and clear blockages.
  - Normal wear and tear (e.g. fuse, brush bar etc.).
  - Use of this appliance on rubble, ash, plaster.
  - Reduction in battery discharge time due to battery age or use (where applicable).
- If you are in any doubt as to what is covered by your guarantee, please contact the Dyson Helpline.

**SUMMARY OF COVER**

- The guarantee becomes effective at the date of purchase (or the date of delivery if this is later).
- You must provide proof of (both the original and any subsequent) delivery/purchase before any work can be carried out on your Dyson appliance. Without this proof, any work carried out will be chargeable. Keep your receipt or delivery note.
- All work will be carried out by Dyson or its authorised agents.
- Any parts which are replaced by Dyson will become the property of Dyson.
- The repair or replacement of your Dyson appliance under guarantee will not extend the period of guarantee.
- The guarantee provides benefits which are additional to and do not affect your statutory rights as a consumer.

**ABOUT YOUR PRIVACY**

**WHEN REGISTERING YOUR DYSON PRODUCT**

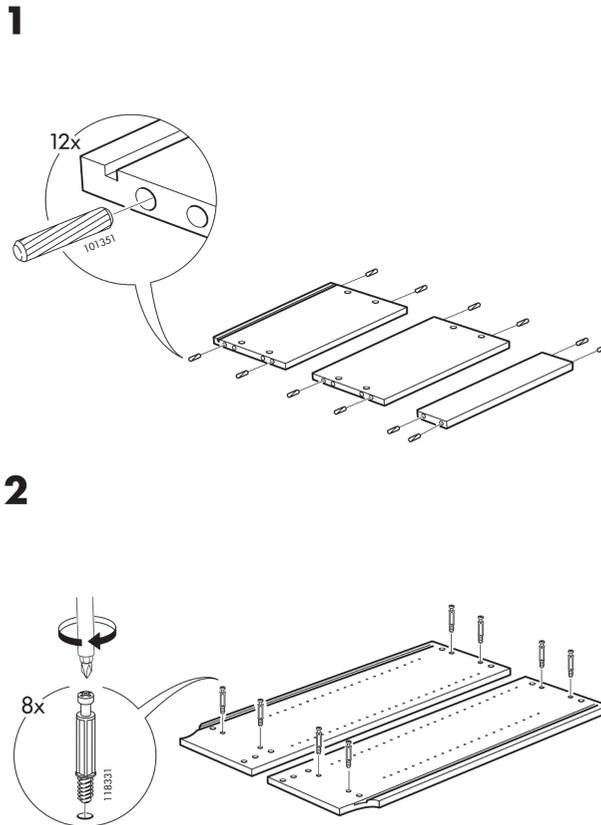
- You will need to provide us with basic contact information to register your product and enable us to support your guarantee.
- When you register, you will have the opportunity to choose whether you would like to receive communications from us. If you opt-in to communications from Dyson, we will send you details of special offers and news of our latest innovations. We never sell your information to third parties and only use information that you share with us as defined by our privacy policies which are available on our website. [www.dyson.co.uk/support/privacypolicy](http://www.dyson.co.uk/support/privacypolicy)

10

Who is, indeed, the author of these texts, and how does he or she write? Undoubtedly, there must be someone, in a remote office in some corner of the world, who has penned these texts. We do not know his or her name, however, because cultures do not usually attach any importance to the creation of such texts. They do not entail any creativity, although they might entail important skills in terms of clarity and communicative efficacy. Let one try to write the instructions to assemble a new furniture, for instance, and it will soon be realized that eliminating any possible source of ambiguity from these texts is not an easy task at

all. That is why many international brands resort to images and, increasingly, to videos, in order to communicate with their global readership. But these visual instructions can also signify ambiguities, as anybody who has tried to assemble a piece of IKEA furniture knows (Fig. 3: Assembly instructions of the Billy IKEA bookshelf).

Fig. 3



9

Authoring such texts, however, is not a creative task, and this paper would like to suggest that the lack of creativity primarily depends on the fact that, in this and analogous cases, the author is not ignorant at all about its readers. The former, instead, knows absolutely everything about the latter or, at least, everything that matters in the process of encoding and decoding of the message. Who is the reader of a *bugiardino*, for instance? He or she is someone who has the pathology for which the medicament is being described, who wants to heal or get better, who wants to know what medicament should be taken, in what quantity, for how long, and with what possible side effects. Any other expectation as regards the possible reader of this text would be extra. Is the reader happy or sad, pessimistic or optimistic, a member of the bourgeoisie or of the working class? All that

does not matter, for the instructive text speaks indistinctly to all of its readers, provided that they access it with the condition that is the only one that legitimately pushes them to read such text, that is, the condition of someone who is sick, or whose beloved ones are sick.

But when, on the contrary, a writer writes a novel, for instance when Hemingway writes *The Old Man and the Sea*, what does he know about his readers? He does not know almost anything. He knows, perhaps, that the reader will be able to understand the language, or a translation of it, that she or he is willing to be told a story, although that too is no longer strictly evident with the modern novel, and that, most importantly, the cooperative reader will seek to interpret the text by seeking to follow the instructions contained therein, although she or he might not be always able to retrieve them, that is, the reader will not always be endowed with the necessary decoding skills.

This is how poetry, literature, and, more in general, the arts, have usually thought of the relation between the sender of a creative text and its potential receivers, as a relation based essentially on a certain amount of mutual ignorance. The author knows that out there, at the other side of the communicative process, lies the potentiality of a cooperation; the details of this cooperation, however, are mostly totally ignored.

## 2. A Blind Literary Date

Some time ago, for instance, I came across a poem by Tu Fu (杜甫) (also transliterated as Du Fu)<sup>2</sup>, one of the finest Chinese poets, whom I happen to like enormously. The poem's title is, in Chinese, *Dēng Yúē-Yáng Lóu* (登岳阳楼), usually translated, in English, as *Climbing Yueyang Tower*. Here is the text of the poem, first in the original Chinese, then in the 2015 English translation by Owen (2015, Vol. 6, book 22, poem 22.30, pp. 42-43):

昔闻洞庭水，  
今上岳阳楼。  
吴楚东南坼，  
乾坤日夜浮。  
亲朋无一字，  
老病有孤舟。  
戎马关山北，  
凭轩涕泗流。

[I heard long ago of Dongting's waters, and this day I climb Yueyang Tower.

Wu and Chu split apart in the southeast, Heaven and Earth float day and night. From kin and friends not a single word, old and sick, I do have a solitary boat. War-horses north of barrier mountains, I lean on the railing, my tears streaming down.]<sup>3</sup>

I can easily imagine that, while writing these verses, Tu Fu, their empirical author, shed some tears. I also shed some tears, reading this poem after so many centuries since it was written. The physical tears of both the author and the reader of these lines, however, are not so relevant.

What is much more important is that they are not linked directly, through immediate empathy at the sight of another person's crying, but through the textual tears that one finds in the last line of the poem. For whom were these tears enshrined into the beautiful pentasyllabics of this poem's regulated verse? From a certain point of view, this poem was able to exert, at least on myself as its reader, a healing power. I read it, I cried with tears germane to those of the author, both our tears being linked by the textual ones evoked in the poem, and then I felt somehow sad but also uplifted, perhaps relieved at the thought that another human being, so remote from me in time, space, language, and culture, could touch my heart so deeply, and that, for the time of the reading of the poem and during its persistent echo, we, Tu Fu and I, might share the same existential space, feel less lonely with our sorrows.

Nevertheless, was the healing power of this text exerted in the same way as a *bugiardino*, the instructions to take a medicament? Tu Fu seemed to have written his poem exactly for me, and to sooth my pains exactly at the time when I was reading his lines, but what did he actually know about me when these lines were composed? He did not certainly know that, many centuries later, a man in his forties at the other side of the planet, coming from a completely different culture and speaking another language, would, with the help of a translation, read his poems and find solace in them. He could not know that I would exist, and he could not know, furthermore, that my existential condition would mysteriously resonate with his, and that would resonate with his exactly through the mirror of the poem in which he described it.

The main semiotic point that I would like to make in this essay is that Tu Fu was able to reach me so effectively, and have my tears shed together with his, exactly because he did not know me. He did not know me in the same way in which, for instance, the writer of a text of medical instructions knows its potential reader. I might have well be a woman in 19th-century France, or a teenager in present-day Japan, or a peasant in 17th-century rural USA. That is not to say, however, that Tu Fu's creation of such a sublime poetic text was entirely solipstistic. The Chinese master did not write only for himself, as many contemporary poets narcissistically emphasize. Tu Fu, like every literary or artistic creator, had a reader in mind, but this reader corresponded to a vague idea, to an idea so vague that it ultimately comes down to a very abstract, but also very noble, presentiment of anthropological companionship, as perhaps this vague idea could be defined. Such presentiment is mostly a hope, an abstract and general hope, which nevertheless is at the fundament of the best creations of humanity.

So as to seize its nature, let one think about what would have happened if, instead of writing his poem for me, a completely unknown stranger, a mere potentiality in the distant time and space, Tu Fu had written the poem knowing me as a friend, as someone he would empirically come across along the road during one of his journeys. In this case, Tu Fu would have chosen his words, metaphors, figures, and evocations seeking to pick those that he would consider the most efficacious ones in transmitting to me a shared feeling of nostalgia for the flowing of time, the distancing from one's beloved ones that it usually entails, and the existential solitude that it brings about, a burden that only tears can relieve. My point is that, if Tu Fu had known me so well as to tailor his poem

expressly for me, for my cultural and social background, for my existential status, for my tastes and sensibility, his poem would not have caused me shedding tears over it. It would have pleased me, but I would not have found solace in it.

The reason for which Tu Fu's poem touched me so deeply exactly depends from the fact that he did not know me at all. He could not possibly know that I would exist, and in what conditions I would exist. Yet, although I was not even a possibility to him, Tu Fu could count on my anthropological companionship. He could rely on the fact that, as members of the same species, doomed with the same excruciating awareness of the passing of time, of the approaching of death, of the deepening of solitude, and of the ineluctability of nostalgia, no matter what my culture, language, or taste, we could meet in the abstract but sweet space of our common humanity, a space that he was able to create for both of us exactly because he did not know me personally, he did not want to please me, he found this deep sadness at the bottom of his heart and he knew that, sooner or later, some other human being, in the same existential situation, would see that sadness and shed tears on it. This is not an encounter that takes place in life, between an empirical author and an empirical reader, but an encounter that takes place between the shadows of them that language inscribes in the lines of a poem. Tu Fu's skill did not consist in pleasing his readers through previous knowledge of them, but in crafting a poetical image that, in its beauty, could then become a literary nest for every germane sadness:

[...] Heaven and Earth float day and night. From kin and friends not a single word, old and sick, I do have a solitary boat. War-horses north of barrier mountains, I lean on the railing, my tears streaming down.

No matter in what century, culture, language, or class, a human being will recognize a universal form of sorrow in these lines, not because they were written on the basis of the author's knowledge of the reader's psychology, but because they were composed in total ignorance of it, seeking to find the most suitable expression to immemorial sadness. That is why, many centuries after Tu Fu's death, although I might not have been in a solitary boat floating along a river, and although I might have never seen a warhorse, I can perfectly conjure up in my mind the image of the poet sitting alone in this boat, leaning on its railings, and crying, for that which matters the most is that I am familiar with the universal cause of this sadness, the passing of time and the losses it provokes, as well as with the flowing of water as its universal metaphor.

### **3. Digital Literary Dating**

A completely different form of writing has become popular around the world from the advent of the Internet and digital communication on. The phenomenon attracted enormous attention in China from the years 2000s on, for instance since the publishing, in 2003, of the blog by Muzi Mei, a woman, writer and journalist who would publicly disclose the

details of her sexual life. Other famous blogs followed, like the one by the rebellious writer and opinion leader Han Han, and others. This new possibility of expression, enabled by developments in communication technology, gave rise to two interesting phenomena.

First, internet platforms like Sina in China and similar platforms in other countries soon offered practically unlimited space to the writing of blogs. Bloggers became a new voice, often with alternative, rebellious, or even anarchist undertones, praised in the west as forerunners of social and political change. The bloggers of Iran were considered as heroes, for instance, and even as martyrs when the establishment somehow repressed their writings. Attention for the innovative character of this new format, however, led many observers to neglect a structural change that was perhaps even more important than the superficial change appearing in their mere content: with the proliferation of authors, the category of readers shrunk more and more, to the point that even in the traditional domain of high literature, digital technology soon allowed practically everyone to become a writer, to author a blog, and even to self-publish a book with no or little cost. The phenomenon became macroscopic with the rise of social networks: through Wechat, Facebook, and other digital platforms, every individual today is daily engaged in the dissemination of micro-contents, which accumulate by the hour but that do not seem to sediment into a work. On the one hand, these contents lack the proper structure that more traditional formats like novels or poems would have; on the other hand, since everybody is extremely busy in leaving these digital footprints in the digital environment, the category of the audience is progressively disappearing, and what is left is, on the contrary, readers that receive messages only in function of those by which they themselves will immediately reciprocate.

Second, readers have stopped being the silent receivers of messages. They can comment and leave traces of their comments about any cultural product, from novels to university classes. Let me take the example of a university professor. Most universities nowadays have students evaluate the classes of their professors. There are social networks and even dedicated apps that rate academic lectures, exactly as if they were hotels or restaurants. Professors can continuously look at these comments, ratings, and rankings in order to monitor the favor that their 'lecturing performances' arouse. The same goes for novelists, who can have 24/7 data about their sales, as well as increasingly sophisticated information about the likes and dislikes, tastes and distastes of their intended readership. James Patterson, for instance, the number one best-selling novelist in the US, decided to write one of his novels, *Women's Murder Club*, in order to boost his sales in comparison to those achieved by his main rival, John Grisham, in relation to the same category of readers.

It is certainly useful for a university professor to know the opinions of students about her or his lectures, as it is certainly interesting, for an author, to receive information about the outcome of a publication in terms of sales and reputation. And yet, a student is not the customer of a company, as well as a reader of literature is not the patron of a restaurant. The most important task of education is to form young minds beyond and sometimes even against their expectations; the most important value of literature is that of enabling minds to travel to other mental places where they would never intentionally go.

## 4. Conclusion: The Death of the Reader

In the 1960s, Roland Barthes prophesized the death of the author, meaning that the new structuralist and post-structuralist understanding of literature would downplay the importance of the biography of the author and extol, instead, the excellence of the work. Digital communication, however, is giving rise to a different scenario: authors are more and more nervously intent to publicize their lives more than their works, also because the category itself of the reader is shrinking to the benefit of those of the fan and the consumer or prosumer. As the marketing of literature becomes predominant, and as the activity of reading as hospitable reception of another person's mind and phantasy is being supplanted by generalized digital narcissism, one wonders whether, in five or six centuries, someone will come across one of these blogs, instant books, commercial novels, pre-fabricated exploits, self-conscious social network streams, and empathize with them in the same way in which, after many centuries of silence, I heard the voice of a remote Chinese poet and found that we were contemporary of each other in the realm of nostalgia.

### Notes

- 1 "What good does "Wind and Rain" do? / On the river and lakes my tears stream down"; Engl. trans. by Stephen Owen (2005, Vol. 6, book 22, poem 22.2, pp. 2-3).
- 2 712, Gongyi, Henan, China – 770, Tanzhou, Hunan, China. Bibliography on Tu Fu is extensive. A complete and annotated translation of his poems is Owen, Stephen, 2015, *The Poetry of Du Fu*, 6 Vols. Warsaw and Boston: De Gruyter.
- 3 To say the truth, the first English translation I read was that contained in Hawkes, David, 1967, *A Little Primer of Tu Fu*. Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, reprinted in 1987 and with a revised edition in 2016 by the Chinese University of Hong Kong. Here is Hawkes's translation, not very dissimilar from the one proposed by Owen:

Long ago I heard about the waters of Tung-t'ing, and now today I have climbed up Yo-yang tower. The lake cleaves the lands of Wu and Ch'u to east and south. Day and night the world floats in its changing waters. Of friends and family I have no word. Old and ill I have only my solitary boat. The warhorse stamps north of the passes. I lean on the railing and my tears flow.

### References

- Barthes, R. (1967). The death of the author. *Aspen*, (5-6).
- Borges, J. L. (1932). *Discusión*. Buenos Aires: M. Gleizer.
- Eco, U. (1976). *A theory of semiotics*. Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press.
- Eco, U. (1979). *The role of the reader: Explorations in the semiotics of texts*. Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press.
- Hawkes, D. (1967). *A little primer of Tu Fu*. Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press. (Reprinted in 1987 and with a revised edition in 2016 by the Chinese University of Hong Kong)
- Jakobson, R. (1963). *Essais de linguistique générale* (French trans. and foreword by Nicolas

Ruwet). Paris: Éditions de Minuit.

Owen, S. (2015). *The poetry of Du Fu* (6 Vols.). Warsaw and Boston: De Gruyter.

### About the author

Massimo Leone (massimo.leone@unito.it) is Professor of Semiotics, Cultural Semiotics, and Visual Semiotics at the Department of Philosophy, University of Turin, Italy. He graduated in Communication Studies from the University of Siena, and holds a DEA in History and Semiotics of Texts and Documents from Paris VII, an MPhil in Word and Image Studies from Trinity College Dublin, a PhD in Religious Studies from the Sorbonne, and a PhD in Art History from the University of Fribourg (CH). He was visiting scholar at the CNRS in Paris, at the CSIC in Madrid, Fulbright Research Visiting Professor at the Graduate Theological Union, Berkeley, Endeavour Research Award Visiting Professor at the School of English, Performance, and Communication Studies at Monash University, Melbourne, Faculty Research Grant Visiting Professor at the University of Toronto, “Mairie de Paris” Visiting Professor at the Sorbonne, DAAD Visiting Professor at the University of Potsdam, Visiting Professor at the École Normale Supérieure of Lyon (Collegium de Lyon), Visiting Professor at the Center for Advanced Studies at the University of Munich, Visiting Professor at the University of Kyoto, Visiting Professor at the Institute of Advanced Study, Durham University, Visiting Professor at The Research Institute of the University of Bucharest, Eadington Fellow at the Center for Gaming Research, University of Nevada, Las Vegas, Fellow of the Käte Hamburger Kolleg “Dynamics in the History of Religions Between Asia and Europe” (Bochum, Germany), Visiting Senior Professor at the Internationales Forschungszentrum Kulturwissenschaften, Vienna, and High-End Foreign Expert and Visiting Professor at the University of Shanghai, China. His work focuses on the role of religion in modern and contemporary cultures. Massimo Leone has single-authored seven books, *Religious Conversion and Identity: The Semiotic Analysis of Texts* (London and New York: Routledge, 2004; 242 pp.), *Saints and Signs: A Semiotic Reading of Conversion in Early Modern Catholicism* (Berlin and New York: Walter de Gruyter, 2010; 656 pp.), *Sémiotique de l'âme*, 3 Vols (Berlin et al.: Presses Académiques Francophones, 2012), *Annunciazioni: percorsi di semiotica della religione*, 2 Vols (Rome: Aracne, 2014, 1000 pp.), *Spiritualità digitale: il senso religioso nell'era della smaterializzazione* (Udine: Mimesis, 2014), *Sémiotique du fondamentalisme : messages, rhétorique, force persuasive* (Paris: l'Harmattan, 2014; translated into Arabic in 2015), and *Signatim: Profili di semiotica della cultura* (Rome: Aracne, 2015, 800 pp.), edited thirty collective volumes, and published more than four hundred articles in semiotics and religious studies. He has lectured in Africa, Asia, Australia, Europe, and the Americas. He is the chief editor of *Lexia*, the Semiotic Journal of the Center for Interdisciplinary Research on Communication, University of Turin, Italy, and editor of the book series “I Saggi di Lexia” (Rome: Aracne) and “Semiotics of Religion” (Berlin and Boston: Walter de Gruyter). He directs the MA Program in Communication Studies at the University of Turin, Italy.