Facing It
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Published by University of Michigan Press

Chambers, Leigh Ross.
Facing It: AIDS Diaries and the Death of the Author.
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RSVP, or Reading and Mourning

“What are you doing next, Mr. Jarman?” After, after, after, that’s the problem when you survive.
—JARMAN

If you go back to the influential essay by Barthes that launched the phrase “the death of the author,” it is immediately clear that Barthes was concerned not with a problem of survival (and continuity) but with a project of substitution and, so, of discontinuity. The famous final clause—“the birth of the reader must be at the cost of the death of the Author” (Barthes 1977, 148)—sounds almost callous, therefore. But this is because, for Barthes, the figures of the author and the reader are standing in for different orders of discourse that, in a somewhat polemical way, are being starkly opposed: the Author [with a capital A] stands for an ideology of communication in which agents are at least partly autonomous, and the Author’s opposite number is not the reader, therefore, but the Critic [we are being referred to Barthes’s polemic in the 1960s against “University criticism” and in favor of the French nouvelle critique]. The reader, on the other hand, who goes uncapsulated, refers us to a concept of writerliness, or textuality, that is described in this essay as “originless” [its “scriptor” is not the origin of text] because it is a function of language itself. This is the reader whose jouissance [bliss] will later be described in Le plaisir du texte. The writer and the reader, for Barthes, are not persons but mere functions of language, whose personal agency is incidental, as it were, to their function in a liberated, expansive economy of writing and reading.

But, if the Author and the Critic are allegorical figures, as their capital letters seem to indicate, the uncapsulated reader and writer [or scriptor] are themselves purely mythic, in the sense that they are conceived by Barthes only in the context of a language completely
disengaged from effects of discourse (where discourse refers to the set of all systems of signification and corresponding signifying practices, together with the relations, whether of subjectivity or of personality, that are produced as an effect of these systems and practices). If the Author and the Critic enjoy autonomous status and agency with respect to language, the writer and the reader are agents of a writerliness and a readerliness that are imagined and that we are asked to imagine, in turn, as purely linguistic effects independent of the order of discourse. “A pure gesture of inscription [and not of expression]” is Barthes’s phrase for the action of writing, and the gesture traces a “field without origin” [1977, 146] because he is already, in anticipation of his work in the 1970s, attempting to conceive of writing as an “intransitive” operation that would be “ideology” free, as opposed to “transitive” or functional [communicative] uses of language—that is, discourse. Never mind that language never occurs independently of discursive effects; the reader whose “birth” is celebrated in “La mort de l’auteur” (“The Death of the Author”) is an entirely theoretical incarnation of this [desire for an] “intransitive” function of language. And the Author (but consequently “the author” as well) can therefore be allowed by Barthes to disappear from the scene of theoretical speculation unregretted.

The substitutions Barthes is effecting in his essay are, of course, polemical in intent, and so they constitute the essay itself as a fine example not of the intransitivity it desires but of linguistic transitivity as a discursive phenomenon. Witnessing, too, is a polemical action, but it is a discursive act to which surviving, not substitution, is crucial, precisely to the extent that surviving is a response to the desire on the part of some to bring about substitutions, that is, to cause certain “figures” [read: persons] to disappear so that they may be replaced by others, in the way that Barthes “disappears” the Author to the benefit of the reader. Reading, from the point of view of witnessing, is thus a site not of substitution but of survival and one to which the death of the author (with a small a) cannot ever be a matter of complete indifference, therefore, precisely because such indifference would imply on the reader’s part a relation of substitution, not of continuity, with respect to the author. But the death of the author, in the sense of a loss of authorial control over signification, is nevertheless the condition of possibility of reading, so that survival-through-reading cannot be conceived as a matter of pure, undiluted
continuity: it is definitionally subject not to the interruption that would substitute reader for author but to a real degree of discontinuity within the continuity it produces.

Living to tell the tale (surviving to write so as to be read) is, of course, a constant theme in witnessing literature, and one might say, using Barthes’s verb, that a witnessing subject is born whenever a potential victim, in conditions of extreme duress, foresees the possibility, remote as it may be, of becoming a narrator: the narrator of the events that themselves seem likely to reduce the witness to silence. AIDS writing honors this urge to live to tell the tale in many narrative, dramatic, filmic, and poetic accounts of the epidemic and its effects, and AIDS diaries respond to it also to the extent that they represent an option, on the part of the author, not to die immediately (by suicide) but to stay alive in order to write. But an AIDS diarist is also, one might say, dying to tell the tale not only in the sense that the story the writer is anxious to narrate (“dying to tell”) is itself a story of survival—of living on in order to write—but also because the author’s dying is a way of making the story “telling.” Its living on is predicated on its protagonist’s death as an author, and on the writing of that story of authorial dying, as a condition of survival through the form of (dis)continuity that is reading. The AIDS diarist does not “survive to write in order to be read,” then, so much as the story’s survival is itself predicated on the reading that his option in favor of writing implies as its indispensable complement. Because the diarist does not foresee living to become a narrator so much as an authorial decision to live in order to write itself foresees the survival of a subject of textuality, the responsiveness of the reader, the guarantee of a certain relation of continuity as opposed to the absolute discontinuity of indifference and substitution, becomes a matter of primary concern. For one cannot bear witness to one’s own death (the statement “I am dead” cannot be uttered) except by recourse to representation and, hence, to the reading through which the énoncé “I am dying” can come to signify “‘I’ is dead.”

But survival then, whether in the form of living to tell the tale or of dying to tell it, is synonymous with deferral, and acts of witness are necessarily acts of deferred (not “immediate” or “direct”) communication. A narrator who survives to tell the tale is no longer the potential victim whose initial access to witnessing lay in the desire to survive so that the story might be told; that desire was, indeed, a first
displacement with respect to absolute victimhood that doubles for the event of survival itself, a prolepsis of the survival that makes the narrative a deferred act (it will be written in the past tense). A fortiori, the author whose project of witnessing lay in the urge to die in such a way that the story of his dying could be told—that is, by writing—sur-vives only by virtue of the relay furnished by the writing and by the reading that makes the writing signify: not the event of survival, in this case, but the event of death intervenes, even though the initial option to live and to write defined witnessing as a function of survival (of survival so as to die writing). Here, then, the fact of deferred com-unication becomes the very sign of the death to which the communica-tion bears witness at the same time as it is the vehicle through which survival becomes possible.

That is why it puts reading in what might be called a “stressed” (not to say distressed) position: stressed in the sense of emphasized, because stress falls on the responsibility enjoined on the reader—the responsibility to be responsive, if I may play on the common etymol-ogy of these two words (from spondere, “to say yes”)—but stressed, too, in the sense of anxious, because the responsibility of responsive-ness is necessarily exercised under conditions of deferral that make the value, and indeed the possibility, of responsiveness dubious. The reader, one might say, is positioned as the “sponsor” (one who says yes) of the act of authorial witness, taking responsibility on behalf of, but also in lieu of, a supposedly “original” witness who was in fact (always) already displaced into representation and, having become irretrievable, can be said therefore not to have survived, even as the requirement that the witnessing be made to survive subsists.

The stressed position AIDS diaries allocate to readership is one that is itself readable in the texts, as I have tried to indicate. Its clear-est and most explicit statement, though, is in a remarkable passage from Dreuilhe’s Corps à corps:

Mon espoir inconscient est que ce livre, surgi comme une excroissance cancéreuse, hors de mon cerveau, devienne un appendice monstrueux qu’il sera possible de séparer finalement de mon corps. J’imagine que chaque phrase, chaque image de ce livre se substituera à un de mes lymphocites fauchés par le SIDA. Dans mon univers délirant, l’écriture n’est pas seulement une thérapie mais une pratique magique.
En tendant à l’épidémie le miroir de mon journal, je peux espérer décapiter le Gorgone sans qu’il me pétrifie. Le philtre dans lequel je plonge aussi mes angoisses et obsessions sera d’autant plus efficace que mon audience sera plus vaste. Chacun de mes lecteurs deviendrait un de mes soldats. Je rêve d’endoctriner, d’enrégimenté tous ceux qui me lisent, pour qu’ils me sauvent. Une fois le cordon ombilical coupé entre le livre et moi, je me serai peut être soulagé de mon SIDA, par cette conjuration de mots que j’essaie d’aligner dans l’ordre voulu. (178–79)

[My unconscious hope is that this book, emerging out of my brain like a cancerous excrescence, might become a monstrous appendix that it will finally be possible to separate from my body. I imagine that each sentence, each image in the book will substitute for one of my AIDS-demolished lymphocytes. In my delirious universe, writing is not just a therapy but a magical practice. By holding up the mirror of my diary to the epidemic, I can hope to cut off the Gorgon’s head without being turned to stone. The potion in which I dip my anguish and obsessions also will be all the more efficacious as my audience will be large. Each of my readers would become one of my soldiers. I dream of indoctrinating all who read me, enrolling them under my banner, so that they will save me. Once the umbilical cord will have been cut between the book and myself, I will perhaps prove to have shucked off my AIDS, through this conspiracy of words that I am trying to line up in the requisite order.]¹

This passage merits lengthy exegesis, so closely does it reproduce—within Dreuilhe’s characteristically military metaphors—the structures of thought associated with “the writing of AIDS,” as I have tried to delineate them in this essay: the writing of the body conceived as a transcription that will survive the body’s death by reaching a readership willing to be “engaged” (enrolled, recruited, enrégimenté), in spite of the distance of death that is figured here, at the end, by the cutting of the umbilical cord and, at the beginning, by

¹. I translate from the original French, Linda Coverdale’s translation being a little too free for my purposes.
the image of the book as a cancerous excrescence that can be cut cleanly off the author’s body. I will stress only two particular points, though. One, Dreuilhe’s willingness to make explicit his “unconscious” hope that writing will function magically as a cure, conditioned on mixing the potion right and lining up the lymphocyte words in the requisite order, can certainly be assumed to lay bare an unacknowledged motivation of AIDS writing in general and of the AIDS diary in particular. The crazy, delirious hope is that “facing it” by means of representation, capturing “it”’s image—the image of AIDS, the image of death—in the mirror of writing will make it possible both, heroically, to decapitate the Gorgon and to survive, like Theseus, the fate of petrifaction. The mythic model is a powerful one. But, concomitantly [and this is my second point], the responsibility placed on Dreuilhe’s reader is also made explicit and exorbitant: it is nothing less than to “save” the dying author, heroic as he may be in his own “write.” The cure of the author is not only a function of the mirror held up Theseus-like to AIDS in his writing but also of the “indoctrination” of a readership that is required to be so engaged, so totally committed to the author’s cause, that the Gorgon will prove powerless.

So strong is Dreuilhe’s vision of salvation here that deferral, as such, is not an explicit issue [although it is, of course, implied by his emphasis on the mediations of writing and reading]. On the other hand, so many elements in this passage—phrases like “unconscious hope” and “delirious universe,” the deployment of verbs of imagining and dreaming, the prudent modalization of verbs through subjunctive forms, the appearance of the adverb perhaps and the careful phrase “je peux espérer” [I can hope]—insist on the author’s knowledge that his desire for cure, his appeal to the reader to save him, are phantasmatic, if not frankly illusory, that what is finally transmitted to the reader is less the naked demand that reading effect the author’s cure than the anxiety to which that demand responds, that is, the desire for such a cure to be possible associated with the knowledge that it is not. But, since the demand is nevertheless made, the reader is put in the classic double-bind situation of being made the addressee of an urgent appeal [save me] while learning simultaneously that the appeal is phantasmatic and that readers cannot do what is here, nevertheless, asked of them. Much as in the case of Unbecoming, what is most efficaciously transmitted, in the end, then, is anxiety—an anxiety
that is, among other things, an anxiety about the effects of death on communication—so that it is the transmission of anxiety about the diminished prospects for survival that reading represents, that itself becomes the vehicle of authorial (textual) survival. And reading that wishes to be responsive to the appeal for cure made by the text is necessarily stressed, therefore, by the knowledge it shares with the text, that such responsiveness is always already rendered inadequate by the fact of death—the fact that is itself made concrete in the deferral of communication without which reading would be neither necessary nor (in anything other than a purely mechanical sense) possible.

There is a short film by the Canadian filmmaker Laurie Lynd that provides an opportunity, although it is not in diary form and does not specifically thematize reading, to reflect on the relation between what I have called stressed reading and the film’s own explicit concern, which has to do with the nature of mourning and, less explicitly, with connections between mourning and witnessing. The film is entitled RSVP, and where it relates mourning and witnessing to a thematics of loss, it understands them more particularly in terms of a dynamics of authority that identifies a problematics of responsiveness as the effect—we can call it the survival effect—of deferred communication. RSVP is thus a film about mourning and witnessing in the specific context of survivorhood, as the “after, after, after” of which Jarman speaks in my epigraph. If deferred messages have a particular authority (borrowed from death), it lies in their power to demand response, but, since response is always and inevitably inadequate, in the face of death’s reality, that inadequacy implies that the task of responding is never done and must be relayed in turn and relayed, of course, endlessly.

The film is set in Toronto. A youngish man, Sid, enters an empty house, evidently just home from a trip. He reads a message taped to a mirror and releases the cat into the garden. The phone rings, but he does not answer it: we hear a jointly recorded message that enables us, although one may not realize it on a first viewing, to hear the “live” voice of Sid’s recently deceased lover, Andy, who has died of AIDS and from whose funeral in Winnipeg Sid is returning. With the note on the mirror this is the first of many instances in the film of a deferred message made possible by the technology of representation [re-presentation], and, as the friend who is calling now records his
message (a second instance), the support he offers makes the viewer realize Sid’s state of bereftness. A glimpse of a hospital bed set up by the French windows looking out into the garden confirms the perception (never specifically confirmed) that AIDS is the culprit.

As Sid looks at two sets of family photos—his own with Andy; then, on the refrigerator, those of Andy’s parents separately, of Sid and Andy separately, and finally of Sid and Andy with a young woman, who will prove to be Andy’s sister (whose lesbianism is briefly suggested)—he prepares to make tea and switches on the radio, as lonesome people may do “for company.” It is a Canadian Broadcasting Corporation (CBC) request program, “RSVP,” and Sid is just in time to catch an announcer responding to the request of one Andrew Sheldon, who, having been unable to attend a recent recital by Jessye Norman, has asked to hear the soprano’s recording of Berlioz’s “Le spectre de la rose,” from Les nuits d’été. As the orchestral introduction fills the air, Sid stands motionless, his face troubled, then hastens to record the music, fumbling badly with the equipment as he does so. Deferral upon deferral: Andy, one realizes, has made the request before his death, setting it up as a message from beyond the grave (we will see later that the lovers own the Jessye Norman recording in their own collection, so there is evidence of intention on Andy’s part). The complicated mechanism of radio technology, but also the built-in delay of request and response, are being employed in the service of a certain project of survival on Andy’s part.

But survival through deferral is also implied in multiple ways by the song itself: a poem by Gautier, set by Berlioz, recorded by Norman, broadcast by CBC in a chain of relays, its own theme is that of survival. With its last faint perfume a wilted rose speaks to the (presumably beautiful young) woman who wore it to the ball and was thus responsible for the rose’s death, but it speaks lovingly of its contentment to find itself lying, as if entombed in alabaster, on its wearer’s breast. Gautier is consciously and specifically (“Ci-gît une rose [Here lies a rose]”) referring his poem to the conventions of epitaph, whereby the “soul” of a deceased person speaks a message addressed to the living:

Ce léger parfum est mon âme,
Et j’arrive du paradis.
[This faint perfume is my soul,
And I come to you from paradise.]

But deferred, now, by the chain of relays, from its context of writing (in which it had the value, perhaps, of a piece of semi-bantering, over-precious, poetic wit), the poem of survival itself survives, albeit with a signification that in the new context is radically altered, since it has become a message from Andy and it speaks of AIDS, Gautier’s ball becoming a possible reference to the good times associated with the urban gay lifestyle and the circumstances of the rose’s death hinting at the possibility of Andy’s having been infected by his lover. The authorial message (about roses and such) has “died” (although it persists from relay to relay as the poem’s énoncé) in order for the poem to become readable as a text of AIDS witness. And the uncanny quality that derives from the “spectral” character of a message that survives, although so marked by death that its authority is profoundly altered (no longer a matter of bantering preciosity but something eerie and momentous), is of course reinforced by the music. Berlioz’s orchestration is lush, luxurious, and often voluptuous but at times also hollow and mysterious, as if he were particularly sensitive to the connotations of death as the guest at life’s feast that are in the poem. And the unearthly quality of Jessye Norman’s operatically trained soprano voice, with its hint of sublimity and its own other-worldly quality (see Lyotard 1988, on “the inhuman”; and Frank 1995, on soprano voices), concretizes very powerfully the idea of a voice speaking “from paradise” with an authority derived from death.

As the music plays, the camera moves out from Sid’s house to explore a community of friends (a lesbian and gay bookstore and counseling center with its bulletin board of obituaries to which Andy’s is added) but also another environment: the high school where Andy taught and where the announcement of his death has been less lovingly vandalized with homophobic graffiti. When it returns, finally, to its point of departure and we discover Sid pacing the hallway as the haunting last measures, with their hollow woodwind orchestration, resound in the empty house:

Ci-gît une rose
Que tous les rois vont jalouser,
the context in which the message from beyond is received has consequently widened: it is no longer the house voided by AIDS but a social scene, one partly of warmth and companionship but also of hostility and confrontation. And, accordingly, the problem of family now enters the picture. Busying himself frantically with packing away Andy’s things, Sid comes upon a sweater, draped over a chair at Andy’s desk, as if he were still using it—the image has clear affinities with Guibert’s similar thematization of the author’s absent presence—and falls into contemplation. Then he goes to the phone and calls Ellen, Andy’s sister in Winnipeg.

If the relays figure “Le spectre de la rose” as signifying the authority messages acquire through (death and) deferral, Ellen—as the presumed lesbian who is also “in touch” with the family—is the film’s principal figure of mediation, that is, of relay, as a mode of continuity. Sid cannot communicate directly with Andy’s parents, but Ellen is able to transmit to them his message about Andy’s message of request and response, which, living in Winnipeg, they will be able to hear because the broadcast, in yet another instance of deferral, is time delayed. Her mother is responsive (“Of course I want to hear it. Thank you for telling me”), but it is also for her to retransmit Sid’s message about Andy’s message, this time to its final destination, Andy’s father, the very figure, one supposes, of patriarchal authority in its homophobic incarnation. She does so by turning on the radio as she serves him his lunch. At first scowling and isolated behind his newspaper then troubled and moved, the father, as ultimate addressee of Andy’s request for a response, remains—by contrast in particular with Ellen, who poignantly breaks down and gives way to grief as she stands listening to the music in her kitchen—not undisturbed but apparently unresponsive.

His response, when it comes, is thus delayed by a week. The film now, as it closes, echoes its opening scenes. As we see Sid approaching and entering his house again, we hear the answering machine once again speaking to the emptiness. Now only Sid’s voice invites the caller to leave a message, but now, too, the caller is not a friend but Andy’s father. “I just wanted to thank you for letting Ellen know about that song,” he records. “I’m sorry we didn’t get a chance to talk
more at the funeral. We know what a big help you were to Andy. We know how important you were to him. Well, thanks.” These, under the circumstances, are broken, poverty-stricken words, and they are not received directly by Sid (let alone by Andy, for whom they come too late); they are, so to speak, “under deferral.” This deferred response to a much deferred message is clearly inadequate, and yet it is also something unhoped for, given the history of alienated affections the film allows us to guess at. For it is a response, and the implication is that this degree of (inadequate) responsiveness would not have been achieved had not Andy’s message itself, by virtue of the authority it borrows from death (and deferral), had the particular power to elicit it. Nor would the message of Andy’s witness have been efficacious had it not been retransmitted through a chain of witnessing relays embodied (leaving Gautier, Berlioz, Jessye Norman, and the CBC out of it, as the vehicles of the message) by Sid, as its first addressee, then by Ellen and her mother, as a series of “afters” that give it social impact, symbolically speaking, on top of its personal value to Sid. And, although the film achieves an effect of closure with the father’s reception of and response to the message, one has to imagine also the further “broadcasting” of its own witnessing message, replicating Andy’s, among the audiences who view it. Consequently, this effect of broadcasting—of relay and retransmission, with all the effects of delay and deferral they imply—becomes finally the film’s most encompassing metaphor for its understanding of what witnessing is and what witnessing entails.

But there is also mourning, and the sweater that, it will be remembered, provoked Sid’s decision to retransmit to the family Andy’s message, received and understood in the first instance by Sid as addressed to him. As the father records his message of apology, acknowledgment, and (perhaps) reconciliation, Sid again, as at the beginning, enters the house but this time removes his jacket, encountering as he does so the sweater that now hangs on the coatrack, the relic of Andy that signifies both his absence and the sense in which he

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2. More accurately, RSVP presents chains of relays as the vehicle for acts of communication that are inserted in other chains of relays: thus, the chain Gautier-Berlioz-Norman-CBC mediates Andy’s communication, across death, with Sid, and this communication initiates the chain that extends to Ellen, the mother and the father. It is then these two interlocking chains that form the vehicle of the film’s communication with spectators, which opens the chain of which my account of RSVP, addressed to its own readership, forms part.
survives and remains present. At this point the memory stirs in Sid that gives the sweater its symbolic charge for him, one of those flashes of reminiscence, seemingly random, that mourners know well, and the film plays back the incident for us. Sid and Andy (whom we see, now, for the first and only time) are leaving the house together to attend a social engagement. To Sid’s slight irritation Andy stops and returns to the house: he has forgotten the sweater. Sid: “It’s not cold.” Andy: “It’s always cold in their house.” Sid: “We’ll be late.” Andy: “We’re always late.” Andy quickly grabs the sweater off the rack, gives Sid an affectionate and reconciliatory peck, and they leave together.

This memory thus signifies that, if the sweater figures Andy’s absent presence, what it means for the survivor, Sid, is a consciousness that it is nevertheless, in the “after”-life of his survivorhood, “always cold” and “always [too] late.” The “after, after, after” of survivorhood (and witness) has, as its concomitant awareness, this sense of coldness and belatedness. Andy’s sweater, of course, might keep Sid warm if he were able to break down the distance of his belatedness (the distance of death) and put it on: after all, he is wearing an undershirt that looks exactly similar to the one Andy is wearing in our brief glimpse of him (perhaps it is the same undershirt?). But we do not see him put it on: in the last shot of the movie he stands, staring and contemplative, by the coatrack. Who dares to think that they might step into a dead person’s shoes or wear their sweater? The dead cannot survive, except figuratively, in us. What response would count as adequate to a message deferred by death? Our responses are always painfully insufficient because they necessarily always come too late, and that, for this film, is the meaning of mourning. All we can do—and this is the meaning of witness—is carry the message forward and pass it on, relay by relay, the closure that would signify an adequate response being endlessly deferred.

Andy’s sweater, hanging forlornly on its rack, can thus symbolically articulate the twin themes I have wanted to develop in this essay: on the one hand, the power of representation, as deferred discourse borrowing its authority from death, with the potential for survival it offers; and, on the other, the inevitable inadequacy of a response to a deferred message, a response such as a reader might furnish, following the death of the author, and made therefore under circumstances of
survivorhood. Witnessing, as the desire to send the message forward—an act of mediation—motivates the story of survival, but mourning’s sense of belatedness necessarily tinges the survivorhood of a reader charged with responding to the act of witness, requiring the response to become an act of relay in its turn. So a brief meditation on reading as a mode of mourning seems indicated, in part because we are not accustomed to considering reading, often thought to be a private act, in the context of social phenomena such as mourning, and in part because it is the dynamics of mourning and the inadequacy of readerly response that account for the relay character of reading in the chain of witness and require a reader to send the witnessing message forward in turn. By their literalization of the theoretical proposition summarized in the phrase “the death of the author,” AIDS diaries require us in a quite particular sense to take seriously the model of reading as a mode of mourning, but the theoretical proposition itself implies a sense in which all reading—reading as a discursive event, not the purely linguistic act described by Barthes—must be tinged with mourning. The stress imposed on reading by its dependence on the author’s death, whether theoretical or literal, is in my opinion a mark of that implication.

As was remarked in connection with Guibert (chap. 3), most academic theories of reading are theories of gain rather than loss. But loss is what mourning is about, and, if stressed reading is understandable as a mode of mourning, it is because the stress derives from a consciousness of loss. Unable either to retrieve an authorial subject who has died into the text or to actualize the full range of possibilities of textual signification that are released by the author’s death, the reader experiences the anxiety of a double bind that would not arise were the author alive and had these responsibilities not become, as a consequence, readerly ones. In a readerly perspective the subject of énoncé, constructed differentially from the subject of enunciation (the I of “I am dying” as opposed to the I of “‘I’ is dead”), may be interpreted as being functionally equivalent to the (original) authorial subject, but this subject is inescapably an object of belated, readerly (re-)construction and offers no guarantee of authenticity, since—as Barthes might say—the text has become originless. On the other hand, however, real acts of reading, which are situated in a discursive economy (with its effects of power, desire, and knowledge through which we are constructed as persons, not pure subjectivities), cannot perform the role
of the reader as it is mythically imagined—a purely linguistic agent of textual realization—in Barthes’s essay. All readers thus function, in the end, something like critics [if not Barthesian Critics] to the extent that their consciousness of the problematics of authorial survival prevents their own sublimation into Barthesian readership. As anxious, mourning readers, they cannot and do not, Critic-like, reify an Author, since the authorial subject is construed as an effect of their interpretation; rather, they are conscious of their inability either to wear the author’s sweater [as a gesture of simple continuation of the author’s discourse] or to ignore the sweater—hanging relic-like on the coatrack and, as it were, “asking” to be worn—in the way that the Barthesian reader, participating in an act of substitution, is assumed able to do. In other words, the anxious reader, unlike the Barthesian reader but like the figure of Sid coming upon Andy’s sweater, is a site of memory and subject to mourning.

Of course, a reader’s memory of an author is not personal, like Sid’s recall of Andy. It is a social memory, if I can so designate the sense in which collectivities can be conscious of the dead whom they have not known: conscious both of their loss and of their survival, their still active “presence” among those who survive them. And, in societies such as our own, there is a class of professional readers, called critics, who are specifically, if far from exclusively, charged with this function of social remembrance with respect to the dead authors in whom a living collectivity recognizes the members it has lost. From his authorial viewpoint Eric Michaels is right, then, to ask (as he does at one point, a bit sardonically—more tongue-in-cheek than with tongue provocatively extended): what can critics do? (157). Can criticism fight disease, save lives? Clearly not. But critics can mourn, and in addition they can participate in projects of witness. For critics are also, definitionally, readers who write, and their function is the production of commentary: that is, they produce texts that are, by definition, in a relation of some continuity with a prior text [without which commentary is meaningless] while nevertheless forming part of a genre that is specific and differentiating, having conventions of its own and regulating a mode of textual production in its own right. Because it belongs to the category of the “uptake,” it is neither fully discontinuous nor fully continuous with prior texts (Freadman and Macdonald).
One might say, therefore—by way of an initial simplification—that the critic as reader is charged with a function of mourning, with respect to dead authors, while the critic as writer is in a position to furnish the relay function on which the continuation of witnessing projects, by virtue of their inevitably deferred character, depends. In both the mode of mourning and the mode of witnessing, criticism can thus be viewed as charged with significant responsibility for the afterlife of texts viewed as sites of discursive interchange, in which the death of an author requires both mourning for that death and continuation of the authorial project. I'll therefore take the figure of the critic as a model for an understanding of the mourning function of reading and of the witnessing function of writing when, in the mode of uptake, it relays a message marked by the authors’ death and, like the CBC in Lynd’s film, attempts to broadcast its effect.

For there is an ethics of criticism that forbids treating texts in cavalier or disrespectful fashion, as certain readers, for example, might take pleasure, or assert themselves, in “poaching,” as Certeau puts it, on a text, appropriating it purely and simply for purposes of their own. (There is, of course, a postmodern celebration of reading as poaching, but it derives, I think, from a properly modest assessment of what a critical reader can do and is not inconsistent with the ethical position I have in mind.) This critical ethics puts the critic in exactly the double bind that I earlier described in terms of the requirement of responsiveness that is made of readers by texts whose authority derives from the death of the author. For it is understood as a particular responsibility of criticism to attempt to take account, in reading, of the context of a given text’s historical production, a context readily conflated with the concept of the “author’s sense” of a work. Whatever a critic’s interest in producing contemporary relevance for a text grasped as an enunciation within the context of its reading, there is always a measure of historical, philological, and/or interpretive work that seeks to restore a putatively original sense through which the reading of contemporary relevance must pass even as it may differentiate itself with respect to it. A critic who did not acknowledge the pressure of such an “authorial” sense as part of a necessary respect for textual integrity would be an irresponsible critic. But the drama of criticism, if that is not too strong a word, derives both from the knowledge that the belated work of historical
reconstruction is illusory (that the author is dead) and from the consciousness that contemporary meanings can only be produced not only differentially, with respect to those that are construed as having been once intended, but also as an actual consequence, therefore, of the author’s death, from which critical commentary benefits because it derives its own authority from it.

There is thus an uncomfortable sense of exhuming—with difficulty and illusorily—an author, in the form of an authorial project, only to bury that author again, or that project, by making use of the resulting text to construct significations corresponding to the interests and purposes of the moment of reading. And it is the pressure of this immediate context of reading (it might include institutional contexts as well as changed historical circumstances) that not only sets critical authority against authorial authority but also prohibits the critic from fulfilling the task assigned by Barthes to his idealized reader, that of fully realizing the potential range of writerly significations released by the death of the author and the historical loss of an authorial project. As a discursive agent, a critic is thus inevitably positioned in innumerable ways that make the critic a double traitor, betraying both the author and the text the author’s death has made possible. Tidy Town, as Eric Michaels might have said, always wins out, to the extent that the critic is charged with tidying out of the way those traces of an authorial project that seem no longer relevant to present concerns but also the full range of textual possibilities—possibilities that exceed the authorial project but which, also, cannot be made to fit the concerns of which the critic, in turn, is an agent. (Notice, as a case in point, the neat narratives constructed, thorough selective reading of a selected corpus, in this essay.) And this, then, is the mechanism whereby a deferred message, marked by the authors’ death and received in the mode of (reading as) mourning, can only be continued—as, in particular, a project of witnessing requires—in the form of a new message.

One way of putting it (with a nod to RSVP) would be to say that a witnessing message that is received as “epitaph”—a genre in which the deceased putatively speaks to the passing wayfarer who temporarily survives—is passed on as “obituary,” in which an other speaks, relaying the message of a dead person’s life and work and doing so in sadness and love but only at the price of burying that per-
son with past-tense verbs and in the form of narrative closure. It was while I was writing these paragraphs and pondering the epitaphic generic structure of Gautier’s “Le spectre de la rose” (and its relation to obituary texts and death notices in RSVP) that I was invited—not, as it happens, a coincidence—to write an obituary for a very dear friend. Now, Gautier’s rose employs a poet to give it a voice from the other side of death, much as Andy makes use of the CBC’s request session for the same purpose. Such is the convention of epitaph:

Et sur l’albâtre où je repose
Un poète avec un baiser
Ecrivit: Ci-gît une rose
Que tous les rois vont jalouser.

[And on the alabaster on which I lie
A poet, with a kiss,
Wrote: Here lies a rose
That every king will envy.]

The message is, of course, a deferred one, and the rose’s death has intervened, but the discursive mode has the structure of “free indirect” style: the poet writes, but the thought (as when Flaubert puts us inside Emma Bovary’s fictional mind) is assumed by the rose (“It is me that kings will envy”). On the other hand, the obituaries in RSVP are, by my count, three: in order of appearance, an obit we see being pinned up in the bookshop, the notice on a classroom door that is defaced with a huge scrawled word, FAGGOT (constituting a new message), and finally Andy’s father’s message to Sid, acknowledging Andy’s and Sid’s status as a couple: “I know how important you were

3. My scare quotes signal the functionality of these definitions within my argument. Epitaphs, as Reid (summarized in MacLachlan and Reid) has emphasized, cannot be defined in terms of any particular mode or structure of address, and Reid would probably want to say that “Le spectre de la rose” is a poem, not an epitaph. My point is that it is self-situated [MacLachlan and Reid would say intratextually framed] as an epitaphic poem, and, similarly, the death notice on the classroom door and the father’s phone message are obituary-like rather than being obituaries. Finally, too, my argument hinges on the closeness of the epitaph and the obituary as genres—the continuity that permits a message received as epitaph to be sent on as obituary—as much as it acknowledges the discontinuity that I am stressing here.
to him.” In their progression these three obituary instances aptly illustrate the degree to which obituary discourse buries the dead and substitutes for “their” message concerns, whether hateful or reconciliatory, which are those of the survivors. The free indirect structure that gave the rose a voice disappears from texts in which Andy no longer, in any sense, speaks. It was hard for me, therefore, to bring myself to write the obituary for my friend: the pressure for me to represent in some sense, that is, to bear witness to, the meaning of her life and the pressure to bury her in a neatly ordered narrative, the latter being the condition of the former, were each intense, and they were in irreconcilable conflict. But, in the end, I did it.

I did it, in the end—and however anxiously—because it would have been no easier for me to write an epitaph than to write her obituary. Once things are at the point where epitaphic and/or obituary genres become relevant, it is already too late. All witnessing discourse, including an author’s original project, is definitionally deferred with respect to its object—that obscure it that it requires us to face—and the distinctions one tries to make, between message and response, sending and receiving, take and uptake, crumble in the face of the evidence of their equal inability to say what it is that they all, as acts of witness, invite us to face. In the way that a message is always already a response [always already deferred], a response [by definition deferred] is already always a message. The important thing, perhaps, is to recognize, as RSVP invites us to, that witnessing is a matter of forming chains of messages that are responses and of responses that are themselves messages, all marked by deferral, and that it is in those chains—in the act of relay, as an inadequate response to a message that was itself already inadequate, the act of transmitting it in hopelessly modified form—that the pain that is definitionally the object and motive force of witnessing discourse is inscribed. It is more important, then, for witnessing chains to be kept alive by acts of relay than for individual acts of representation to be judged [something they cannot be] accurate or even adequate.

No message is expressive of the pain. The pain lies—a readable object—in the fact of that inexpressivity, demonstrated as it is by chains of deferral to which it gives rise. The pain that discourse bears witness to is both the fact of discursive inadequacy in the face of pain and the fact that this discursive inadequacy fails to express. It is possible to write “I am dying” and to read “‘I’ is dead,” but the message
“I am dead” (the burden of the rose’s communication to its erstwhile wearer and of Andy’s communication to Sid), although I who am living can write it, is one that cannot exist, either as a literal statement (one in which the signified, via reference, would be in underefered relation to an actuality, such that the statement could not be read allegorically, like Andy’s or the rose’s) or as a sincere utterance (one in which énoncé and enunciation would be indistinguishable, such that neither “rhetorical” [intended] nor “dramatic” [unintended] irony would be inferred). We can range, on the “I am dying” side, writing like that of AIDS diaries, and on the “‘I’ is dead” side, reading as mourning and corresponding modes of mourning writing, like the epitaphic and the obituary. And with those discourses we pass au plus près de la mort, perhaps. But the unsayable, indescribable, inhuman it to which they bear witness comes within discursive range only to the extent that discourse, in the inadequacy of its deferrals, endlessly enacts its (it’s) effects, gaining not the authority of death but one “borrowed,” as Benjamin so cannily said, from death. We cannot know, understand, grasp, or comprehend, as long as we survive, what discourse is unable to say—but discourse, which has its own modes of survival, can teach us to face it.

The twentieth century, to those who have lived through it, feels like a period of unremitting pain. The two world wars, the two major revolutions (Russian and Chinese), the great depression, the Holocaust and nuclear fear, decolonization and the mass displacement of populations, the survival of historic oppressions and ancient hatreds, the cold war and the reversion of late capitalism, its historical competition apparently out of the way, to the ideology of laissez-faire and now a global epidemic, the effects of which might have been considerably mitigated were it not for government cynicism and social prejudice—all these, and others I haven’t listed, have caused misery that has gone untold as well as provoking a mass of witnessing literature. There is probably an element of historical foreshortening in stressing the pain of the twentieth century, since, after all, humanity seems always to have been subject to war, famine, oppression, economic misery, gender and other violence, and epidemic. The practice of witness is also ancient: as old, at least, as the book of Exodus, it encompasses, for example, plague narratives and accounts of slavery. But, from the poetry and novels of the great war to the literature of the
Holocaust, the *testimonios* of Central America and the narratives and diaries of AIDS witness, our own century has indisputably seen an unprecedented surge in the production of witnessing texts.

This phenomenon raises at least two questions. One arises from the observation that not all emergencies produce witnessing texts and that each emergency seems to require the invention of its own forms of witness: there are conditions of possibility for the emergence of testimonial literature and determinants of genre that have not been theorized. Perhaps, in concentrating on the specificity of AIDS diaries, I will have made some slight contribution toward addressing that question, although ideally such a study should obviously be comparative. The second question asks why the twentieth century, unlike—or more so than—earlier periods, has been an age of witness. Here again there are conditions of possibility to consider. They include the greater access of oppressed, disadvantaged, and marginalized people to the means of self-representation: writing and other technologies of representation, publication and broadcasting, and so forth. They also include the failure of bourgeois comfort to protect the middle class, and notably its intellectuals, from the effects of war, ethnic and racial violence, pestilence, and the rest. But, if we look for an underlying motivation, a necessary cause deeper than the conditions of possibility, the clue lies, perhaps—this is a hypothesis for future work—in the characteristic orientation of practices of witness toward survival (living/dying to tell the tale) and the desire their structures of address imply for there to be a future. Our century might be the first period—or the first in a long time—to have seriously doubted the plausibility of humanity’s having a future and to have turned to witnessing as a response to that doubt.

Witnessing, as a discursive genre, does not guarantee a future, of course. At most it foresees some sort of survival as an eventuality. If I am to survive in order to tell the tale, I must refuse the more obvious likelihood of my becoming a mere victim; if my tale is to survive me, it must find a future audience, and that audience must be responsive. What witnessing most profoundly bears witness to, then—over and above the horrors that it represents—is the desire for this to be the case: for me to survive or for my tale to find a reader. It cannot produce a future, but it can gesture in this way in the direction of that “after, after, after” that so wearies Derek Jarman but which nevertheless defines both personal survival and the survivorhood on which
textual survival depends. I’ve written this essay, therefore, and attempted to give some kind of “after” to the texts whose address structures I’ve responded to and whose message I’ve attempted to relay, because I share the desire that there be a future that I detect, as a reader, so poignantly at work not only in the texts but in the very fact of their having been written. It has been a work of mourning, and I hope a work of witness. But, reader, how will you respond? It’s your turn now.