

Etc.: No End to Interpretation of
Julien Green's *Le Voyageur sur la terre*

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A critical reappraisal of Julien Green's *Le Voyageur sur la terre* may bring a realization that the text itself is the itinerant traveler, a vagabond temporarily sheltered in readings accorded to it while it awaits entry into heaven where its meaning is revealed. A tale incorporating inhospitable interpretations, *Le Voyageur sur la terre* charts a journey toward an impossible homecoming, where the confusion of narrative voices, origins, and identities is finally resolved in a celestial illumination of perfect clarity. As Green's hero is doubled by a secret self whose automatic writing intends its own destruction, Green's story calls attention to its increasingly precarious status, thematizing its gradual dispersal and equating its dynamic with the exhaustion of its premise. As his work aims at its extinction, Green joins other contemporary authors for whom "la finalité de l'écriture n'est peut-être pas . . . le projet de ressusciter, dans un mouvement de création et de recreation, le réel, mais bien plutôt de s'en débarrasser, de l'épuiser" 'the finality of writing is perhaps not the project to resuscitate, in a movement of creation and re-creation, the real, but rather to be rid of it, to exhaust it' (Rabaté 133).¹ But whereas Dominique Rabaté sees Proust and Camus deriving aesthetic satisfaction from their subject's annihilation in the act of writing, Green's conversion of an obscure self into transparent expression remains a trip that cannot conclude: "l'épuisement n'est pas un donné, il est une quête, un chemin" 'exhaustion is not a given; it is a quest, a path' (11). Indeed, in positing its reading as *eschaton*, Green's work does not subordinate its death to the production of new art but insists that it survive until its significance is complete.

Inextricably woven into Green's text are both a reflection on the religious life and an interrogation of the value of the literary enter-

prise. Critics like Kathryn Wildgen have therefore tended to agree on the self-reflexive nature of Green's novella: "In this story with so much emphasis on reading and writing and making up stories . . . have we not a long meditation on the creative process written by a man still wracked with doubt about the suitability, even the morality, of his chosen profession?" (213). Defined as a miscellany of the Biblical and Gothic tales that he reads, Daniel O'Donovan is also apprehended as the text he leaves behind. In this way, Green's story not only identifies its genre affiliation as the supernatural/fantastic; it also foregrounds as its subject the problematics of its reception. Recirculated among readers as its erroneously attributed meanings, Daniel's errant manuscript travels in search of understanding. Green's work thus becomes a corollary of God's creation, "monde . . . livré dans son inachèvement même" 'a world delivered in its very incompleteness' (Rabaté 129). Distorted by the stupidity and malice of its audience, condemned to wander eternally, the story defines its correct interpretation as the one it never receives. Finding no asylum in the world, it remains an "ouvrage abandonné," "une création imparfaite qui n'est jamais en passe de devenir œuvre" 'an abandoned work,' 'an imperfect creation which is always on the way to becoming an œuvre' (Rabaté 129). As Daniel projects the perfect interlocutor as his *Doppelgänger* Paul, who burns the books that had prevented Daniel from achieving self-knowledge, Green's book defines its ideal reader as the God who sees but never responds and whose silence is a guarantee of interpretive lucidity.

Since conditioning his textual address is the essential feature of Green's protagonist, Daniel's loneliness motivates him to create Paul as the blank page which, when written, will provide him temporary sanctuary. "[M]onologue extérieur qui cherche à susciter la présence manquante d'autrui pour accueillir sa confession" 'an exterior monologue which seeks to provoke the presence of a missing other in order to receive his confession' (Rabaté 17), Daniel's manuscript is a plea to which an unexpressed compassion is the answer. But as this paper argues, evidence of Daniel's deliverance from the world is the exile of his narrative in the realm of incomprehension. What testifies to the integrity of the meaning of Green's story is the certainty that it cannot be grasped by confused and earthbound readers. The object of the *Voyage* is never to arrive but to pursue its endless journey through wrong interpretations, while maintaining a belief in a conclusive exegesis whose accuracy is a function of not being of this world.

Undertaken in 1924, *Le Voyageur sur la terre* still seethes with the fanaticism that permeates the vituperative aphorisms that Green collected under the title *Pamphlet contre les catholiques de France*. A diatribe against tepidity and indifference, the *Pamphlet* rails against Catholics who regard religious exaltation as madness. "La vraie prédication," writes Green, "est folle" 'truth preaching is mad' (889). While targeting the clergy with his obloquy, Green focuses on the communicative gap between priest and congregation, speaker and audience. Adumbrative of the thesis advanced in *Le Voyageur*, Green bemoans not only the spiritual aridity of the preacher and the apathy of the church-goer, but also the need to adjust the message to its addressee. In the same way that the full significance of Daniel's story depends on others' incomprehension, the priest can convey a divine message only through its banalization. The clergy speaks badly of heavenly things, Green affirms, "car il ravilit tout au niveau de l'intelligence humaine" 'since it lowers everything to the level of human intelligence' (*Pamphlet* 887). As the value of Daniel's message is attested to by its unintelligibility, the authenticity of his mystical vision is confirmed by the trivializing interpretations assigned it by readers who judge him to be crazy. Until God welcomes home Green's migratory text and turns its language into light, it remains in the public domain, where its truth is proclaimed by people's failure to perceive it. In this way, Green's writing is patterned on the Church's practice of guarding its greatest secrets by disseminating them in vulgarized form, as the clergy "publie la vérité afin qu'elle ne soit pas connue" 'publishes the truth in order that it not be known' (890).

Already old when it begins, Daniel's manuscript is a primary narrative embedded in commentaries that obscure its meaning. Tracing the meandering textual itinerary and its exhausted progression toward an end it never reaches are the tendentious readings of Daniel's account given by his uncle, his boarding-house landlady, a local newspaper editor, and the Fairfax University chaplain's sister. All, Green shows, are closed doors, shelter refused to a wayfaring narrative that cannot lay its burden down. Like Scripture falsified by sloppy exegesis, Daniel's text is clouded by interpretations that purport to elucidate it. In the story of a young man searching for the "source of living waters," Green's text is a river fed by murky tributaries, a stream clogged by the alluvium of critical misunderstandings.

An anterior document situated in the recent past, Daniel's story is not the one that reaches the reader. Instead, there is access only to a version supplied by "l'auteur de la traduction qu'on va lire" 'the author of the translation that one is going to read' (*Le Voyageur* 15). Presented by an unnamed scholar whose hermeneutic integrity is compromised by his tone of casual dilettantism, the frame narrative describes itself as the byproduct of a fortuitous discovery made in the course of "une petite recherche littéraire" 'a little piece of literary research' (15). Underscoring the seriousness with which Daniel composed his papers is the frivolousness with which his "translator" "s'amusa à les recopier" 'amused himself in recopying them' (15). Like the dead student's body that is fished out of the river, his manuscript is retrieved from its fluvial journey so that the corpse of his text might be autopsied by inept pathologists.

As the subject of Green's story is the journey through its audience, it opposes the clear significance of an original account to the silt-encrusted versions into which it is transformed. Green's ideal would be that the voyage make a circle—that a text inspired by the Bible end with a biblical inscription on the headstone of its hero. Then the teleology of the narrative and the life that it relates would not be defilement, pollution, opaqueness, and confusion, but a return to the transparency which it had originally possessed. "*Comment donc un jeune homme purifiera-t-il sa voie?*" 'How will a young man purify his way?' (16), to which the Psalm's next verse responds: "En accomplissant vos paroles" 'by doing your word.'²

If purification of one's path comes through fulfillment of God's word, then the end of Daniel's life as recorded in his manuscript should bring the coalescence of his writing and its source. However, the writer's death does not cause the inhumation of his work, but the production of new commentary by disputatious critics. Controversy over the disposal of Daniel's remains blocks interment of his manuscript in interpretive consensus. Since a grave in hallowed ground is disallowed the suicide, the critical reception accorded Daniel's writings is what ultimately determines the manner of his burial. Indeed, the last word Daniel writes becomes the first word of his readers, as the editor of a local periodical announces his plan to publish Daniel's manuscript, choosing "comme titre le verset qui avait servi d'építaphe" 'choosing as a title the verse that had served as an epitaph' (16).

Oblivious to the self-impeaching implications of his remark, the author of the frame observes that the inconclusiveness of Daniel's

tale had prompted others to write conjectural appendices meant to bring the text to closure: "On eut donc une suite au manuscrit," the scholar explains, "mais elle n'a que l'intérêt d'une histoire imaginaire et j'ai cru bon de la négliger" 'There was a continuation of the manuscript, but its only interest was as an imaginary story, and I thought it appropriate to leave it out' (16-17). By his own admission, the narrator contributes to undermining the exactitude of Daniel's story, imitating other interpreters who emend, translate, expurgate, supplement, and fictionalize what they cannot understand—making all the more apparent the irony of the first line of Daniel's text: "Je n'écris pas ceci en vue d'un lecteur" 'I am not writing this with a reader in mind' (17).

As in death Daniel becomes his textual estate, so in life he had been an unwanted legacy bequeathed to his uncle. Like a story domiciled in bad readings, the orphaned Daniel is received coldly in Charles Drayton's home, where he is consigned to an upstairs bedroom adjacent to a "chambre de débarras" 'storage room' that had once been haunted. Grudgingly sheltered in a home filled with unspoken hostilities, Daniel leads a solitary life, sequestered in silence, surrounded by his taciturn uncle, a garrulous aunt whose speech, as Daniel says, "demeurait pour moi à peu près inintelligible" 'remained for me nearly unintelligible' (23), and a retired Confederate captain whose neck injury "l'empêchait de parler comme il voulait" 'prevented him from speaking as he wished' (18-19).

Offsetting what Jacques Petit calls the "thème de la communication impossible" 'theme of impossible communication' (1050) is the proliferation of books in the text, from the expensive, leather-bound volumes filling Drayton's library to the few worn tomes to which Daniel admits he is attached. As his affinity for the supernatural is reinforced by his fondness for Byron and Shelley, as his puritanical zealotry is fired by his reading of Hawthorne, Daniel is already a gloss, an interpretation reinterpreted by analysts of Green. Thus, Petit does not see Daniel as a bewildering composite text whose elusive meaning maddens critics in their effort to apprehend it, but instead regards "ces lectures" as "une des causes de la folie de Daniel" 'these readings as one of the causes of Daniel's insanity' (1054).

As the path toward exhaustion winds through readings of pre-existing works, Daniel can ascend to "[l]a source des eaux vives" 'the source of living waters' (45) only by emptying his library, disassembling the patchwork text he has become, writing the record of

his literary suicide, and ensuring that the record be burned after he dies. Raised in an atmosphere of contemptuous neglect, Daniel is poisoned by his aunt's jeremiads, by the story she tells him of Frank MacKenna and his mysterious death in the mountains, and by the biblical account of Elisha's curse on the children who mock him and then are eaten by bears. Cautionary tales of wayward children punished for their disobedience, these stories not only foreshadow the manner of Daniel's passing—"mort par la visitation de Dieu" 'dead from a visitation by God' (16)—but also construct him as a derivative text whose conclusion is predetermined by the works it reenacts. At the same time he is quartered in his uncle's house, Daniel is sent out on a journey through his textual ancestry. So when he finds his nephew in the dining room where he spends his days reading, Drayton examines the title and cover page and then returns the book to Daniel, saying "Tous les livres sont bons" 'All books are good' (26).

Daniel's literary ascesis begins only when he is addressed by a divine message that is intended for him alone. Inscribed in Gothic letters, a sign hangs above the wooden crosspieces of Daniel's bedroom door, a sign admonishing him to remember "*qu'il y a dans cette pièce quelqu'un qui te voit et t'écoute en silence*" 'that in this room there is someone who sees you and listens to you in silence' (20). As the walls of self are covered with the writing that ensures Daniel's imprisonment, it is fitting that his passage to freedom should take him through a door that separates him from books and constitutes his conscience as a text legible to the God who never leaves him.

Daniel is given the chance to escape the mortal influence of writing (which even makes him apply to himself the meaning of the epitaph on his aunt's gravestone: "Elle dort sous l'ombre,/dans le secret des roseaux" 'She sleeps in the shade in the secret of the reeds' [27]), when the Captain unexpectedly offers to fund Daniel's studies at Fairfax University. Modeled on the University of Virginia where Green had gone to school, Fairfax initially promises only to further inhumate the young man beneath the books to which he is assimilated. But the prospect of deliverance from Charles Drayton's house has as a consequence the inaugural appearance of Daniel's double, a figure whom one critic calls "*une sorte de sur-moi*" 'a kind of super-ego' (Vernescu 99), and whose primary function is to liberate Daniel from the language that ties him to the world.

One day while walking in a cemetery, through a grove “d’où l’on voyait, entre les arbres, les grands roseaux noirs se pencher sur l’eau boueuse” ‘from which one saw, between the trees, the tall, black reeds leaning over the muddy water’ (32), Daniel subconsciously reacts to the topological corollary of the inscription on his aunt’s tombstone. Strengthening the association of graveyard and library, this mortuary landscape motivates Daniel’s resolve not to be buried, like his aunt, beneath other people’s words, but instead to accept the Captain’s offer and leave the following day.

On returning to Drayton’s house, Daniel is again received in his uncle’s library, where the latter proposes to formalize Daniel’s role as amanuensis. It is not surprising that Daniel should conceive of authorship as a repudiation of his function as receiver of others’ texts. So while Drayton drones on about his own irreligious work in progress, Daniel stops writing and injects into the transcript his own phrase: “*Non, mon oncle; je ne serai jamais votre secrétaire*” ‘No, my uncle, I will never be your secretary’ (33). Thus, when Green describes writing that disavows its premise, he shows the function of the text is to hasten its own end.

At the university, Daniel concludes his mysterious relationship with Paul when he consents to relinquish his worldly possessions, proclaiming his willingness to renounce “à des livres, à mon argent, à moi-même, à ma tranquillité” ‘books, my money, myself, my peace of mind’ (50). Coinciding with Daniel’s incineration of his library as the price of his initiation as a writer, the last line of his manuscript describes the moment he had started it: “A l’aube j’écrivis la relation qu’on vient de lire” ‘At dawn I wrote the account that has just been read’ (51). Daniel is able to experience what Rabaté calls “la source de la joie esthétique comme dépossession active de soi” ‘the source of aesthetic joy experienced as active self-dispossession’ (10), yet knows that this joy can be purchased only with the supersession of the aesthetic by the mystical. Discovering the Word through the refusal of others’ texts, he is doubled by his writing and so acts as the scribe of God, not as a servile copyist of his uncle’s blasphemous utterances.

In showing how an originary enunciator displaces all secondary narrators, Annette Tamuly rightly traces the sense of the uncanny in Green to a reassignment of the fundamental prerogative to speak:

L'étrange dans les romans greeniens peut bien provenir d'un dédoublement terrifiant du moi des personnages, mais il peut tout aussi bien être vécu comme l'envahissement du moi par une intervention divine, et c'est bien ce qu'attestait, à notre sens, l'archi-parole.

The strangeness of Green's novels may well arise from a terrifying doubling of the characters' selves, but it may just as well be experienced as an invasion of the self by God's intervention, and, to us, it is that which attests to the original Word. (170)

As Daniel's text preexists its commentary, Green's story dresses in symbolic language a prior experience of the ineffable to which it strives to return: "constant pèlerinage aux sources du symbole" 'a constant pilgrimage to the sources of the symbol' (Tamuly 173).

It is immediately after Paul inventories the books that are later burned that Daniel falls asleep and dreams of the dissociation of his body and consciousness. Suggesting that his censorious new acquaintance is the judge who reads a passive textual self, the dream ends when Daniel awakens feeling compelled to write, driven by an unknown force which, as he says, "me poussait la main" 'was pushing my hand' (45). The two writing episodes complement one another since, in the first, sleep is followed by the involuntary production of an oneirical document which is finished at dawn and subsequently destroyed while, in the second, the manuscript is started at dawn after a sleepless night and yet reaches the reader intact. Whereas Daniel had initially been lodged next to the haunted room in his uncle's house, he ultimately leaves the spectral remnant of his terrestrial identity to infest the rented room of Miss Smyth's boarding house, a phenomenon attested to by "[u]n très grand nombre de personnes [qui] demandent à visiter sa chambre et . . . [qui] soutiennent qu'elle est *hantée*" 'a considerable number of people asking to visit his room and maintaining that it is haunted' (51). No ectoplasmic residue, the restless ghost inhabiting Green's story is the protagonist's unburned manuscript. Returning repeatedly to the cemetery as privileged topos, *Le Voyageur* metaphorizes consecrated ground as the site of the definitive interpretation it is forever denied. It is the mortification of an old self that consents to die to be reborn in God that gives birth to Paul as its next avatar, the double first glimpsed in a graveyard. Effected in the dream, the divorce of Daniel as body from Paul as consciousness is reiterated as the sepa-

ration of experience from its record. Linking his corporeal identity with the books and money he loses, Daniel witnesses the emergence of a newborn authorial self from the vacated shell of the dead materialist he had been: "J'eus l'impression que mon esprit se séparait alors de ma chair et que j'étais arraché à moi-même" 'I had the impression that my mind [spirit] was separating itself from my flesh and that I was being torn from myself' (50).

The chronicles of the events undergone at the university—Daniel's meeting with Paul, his locating a room, the dream, the disappearance of his possessions, his waiting table in Miss Smythe's dining room are all accounts of humiliation and dispossession, the flesh of experience that wastes away to become the spirit of the narrative. Even the pride of authorship is forbidden Daniel, since while he declines to be his uncle's secretary, he becomes the hand that copies words whose origin is unknown.

A cipher in life, Daniel is "un jeune homme convenable" 'a proper young man' (56) who is ignored by everyone and yet who nonetheless enjoys a posthumous notoriety through the work he leaves behind. While termination of Daniel's manuscript coincides with a reference to the conclusion of the act of reading it, it is immediately followed by a remark about the cessation of its author's life, "la fin tragique de M. Daniel O'Donovan" 'the tragic end of Mr. Daniel O'Donovan' (51), which enflames curiosity and resuscitates the dead man as his story. The spectacular suicide of the student, whose body is smashed on the rocks and engulfed in the roiling water of a river, contrasts with the unceremonial obsequy accorded his manuscript that is left in a drawer. Given Daniel's stated intention to burn his papers, one can only speculate as to why he leaves his writings where others will find them—in his room, "dans le tiroir de la table" 'in the table drawer' (51).

Recovered from its modest grave, Daniel's story is the sinner's body that cannot be delivered from the purgatory of interpretation nor released into the cleansing fire of obliteration. Survival of the book, its publication and appropriation by an audience are the penance consented to by one whose transgression is to write. Even the existence of Green's novella gives evidence of the contagion of authorship, as exposure to writing stimulates an impulse to write, and Daniel's shattered limbs become the "*fragments de lettres*" 'fragments of letters' (51) designed to unify what is thought to be a disconnected narrative.

No sooner is Daniel's manuscript discovered than it is "remis sur l'heure au typographe" 'sent to the printer within the hour' (52), prepared for printing, even as its problematic significance generates a flurry of correspondence among those it touches. More than incriminating the literature that corrupts, Green's tale decries the morbidity of the critical analysis, the "petite recherche littéraire" like this one that denies authors what Blanchot calls "le droit à la mort" 'the right to die.'

Unlike Daniel, who writes to free himself of the pernicious influence of others' works, his audience wishes to substitute their commentaries for a dead author. Evident in the analyses done by Daniel's readers is a condescension that trivializes every text that competes with their own. Thus, the scholar who "amuses himself" in recopying Daniel's manuscript acknowledges no kinship with the sententious Charles Drayton, who replaces the book of Daniel with his own ("voici *mon* manuscrit" 'here is my manuscript' [53]). Seeing fit to abridge Drayton's letter, which he describes as "sans intérêt" 'without interest,' the narrator also feels entitled to edit Daniel's text, failing to recognize that Drayton is not the only one to succumb to the "*plaisir de se raconter*" 'the pleasure of talking about himself' (55).

Empty of meaning until readers project onto it what Norman Holland calls their "identity themes,"³ Daniel's work is a host that sustains its parasitic readings. Judged as a book on the basis of his books, Daniel makes a negative impression on his landlady, who remarks on "l'absence des Ecritures" 'the absence of the Scriptures' (46), and disapproves of the young man's selection of translated novels. Conditioned by their religious beliefs and literary predilections, Daniel's acquaintances and relatives respond to him on the basis of what they see in him of themselves. Even Green diminishes the spiritual significance of Daniel's story by supplying a psychological theory of the character's pathology, and by undercutting the supernatural explanation of Daniel's experiences as he refers to a certain Dr. Myers, whose 1919 volume on schizophrenia, dissociative behavior, and secondary personalities is alleged to shed light on Daniel's case. Such reductive views affirm a hermeneutic *parti pris* that obstructs the text's progression toward exhaustion and encourages analysts to repeat themselves unthinkingly. More than Daniel, who sees his pen fly across the page, it is his critics who are the true practitioners of "l'écriture automatique" 'automatic writing.'

Springing from the "source des eaux vives," Daniel's text seeks to empty into an ocean of understanding and light. As the wayfarer longs to go home, the river of the story moves toward "[la] *fin de la course*" 'the end of its course' (43). But there are no still waters of interpretive unanimity, only passage through a cacophony of competing voices and the clamor of words begetting words.

Destroyer of books, Paul may be the missing other whom Daniel invents to hear his confession. But like Daniel's manuscript, Paul is only a reflection of his creator and so lacks the autonomy of the truth-detecting reader that Daniel idealizes as the one to set him free. Acknowledging the lie inherent in the act of confessional writing, Daniel distinguishes between the autobiographer and the past self that becomes his subject, unwittingly demonstrating the fact that, as Barrat John Mandel says, no one can "talk about the present . . . but by distancing and fictionalizing it" (qtd. in Renza 3). It is because his self-narrative misrepresents him that the prevaricating writer depends on the audience he deceives and magnifies in the hope that they can extricate the meaning he falsifies in the process of expressing it. Exalting the fools who later read him, Daniel admits that "une personne à qui l'on ment . . . devient une sorte de juge et grandit aux yeux du menteur" 'a person to whom one lies becomes a kind of judge and grows in importance in the eyes of the liar' (34). As his journey takes him from reading to embodying the books he burns to permit a new identity to emerge, the ongoing process of creation never stops, never allows a true self to crystallize. There is no Aristotelian entelechy that equates the written text with a realization of authorial potential. The greater the lie, the higher the judge, so that God alone can release Daniel from the compulsion to write and can know the truth that exists outside the narrative that distorts it.

Illustrating the theme of dispossession, Green's novella ends with its disparagement by the audience, as the account of Daniel's deliverance becomes tarnished and confused in the process of relation, and the story's exposition blocks an understanding of what Miss G. calls "le fond même de cette étrange, de cette vilaine histoire" 'the basis of this strange and sordid story' (66). The aesthetic pleasure afforded by writing that is disencumbered of the real is offset by the inexhaustibility of the comments writing generates. Aspiring to the beatific silence of heaven, Daniel finds himself sentenced to homelessness, condemned to suffer the imperishability of his manuscript, so that, "à celui qui a voulu se préparer une mort sans histoire,

[l'oeuvre] n'apporte que la dérision de l'immortalité" 'to the one who wanted to prepare himself for a death without history, the work brings only the mockery of immortality' (Blanchot 328).

"[P]ersonnage livré au destin de son inachèvement" 'A character delivered to destiny in a state of incompleteness' (Rabaté 129), Daniel falls into the hands of his readers, becoming a character in a collective fiction revised each time it is interpreted anew. In the manner of a *paraleipsis*, the "etc."s that conclude each of the letters commenting on Daniel's story call attention to what they omit, underscoring the interminability of the remarks that go unrelated. As writing whose goal is to end, Daniel's text targets the silence that opens the door to paradise. With the sacrifice of his books, his money, and his will, Daniel's self is effaced so that in its place may come the one who will guide Daniel's pen and who, as Paul says, "te conduira dans tous les chemins de la vie" 'will lead you in all the paths of your life' (51). But while Daniel's soul and Green's meaning may fly away toward an unverifiable consummation in God, what is left behind is the flotsam carried along by a self-replenishing current of *commentaire intarissable*. Modeling its fate, Green's text shows Daniel's manuscript ending where others' begin. As the "vilaine histoire" is debased by the incontinence of interpreters whose words flow unchecked, they confer on the story an earthly immortality. Unabbreviated, it is an eternal life that nonetheless begins with the "etc."s on the page that leave unsaid *the other things* that future critics have yet to say.

Notes

1. All translations are mine; all emphasis is in the text.
2. Taken from Psalm 98, verse 9, this Biblical citation is judged to be particularly important by Petit, who calls attention to "la seconde partie du texte, réponse qui éclaire le récit" 'the second part of the text, a response that clarifies the text' (1048).
3. See Holland, "UNITY IDENTITY TEXT SELF," *passim*.

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