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Authentes: a Shadow-Play or A Series of Observations in “Post” about Authenticity

Abstract: The word “post” is used in the title of this paper as in the film industry abbreviation of “post-production.” In a series of connected sequences, the paper considers the meanings of “authenticity” in its relations to the existential project of the modern humanist self, and to the artefactual register of artistic (literary) expression, which at some point coalesce indistinctly. The aura of authenticity extends over both, and the observations “in post” seek to retrace this process from beyond its accomplished form.

Keywords: Authenticity; Modern Humanist Self; Interiority; Literary Expression.

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PLAY

Authenticity is a dirty word. Discredited, misappropriated, overused. Not at first sight, though. At first sight a spectre, it haunts the projects (of self, of others, of other selves), apparent and apparently from within, from the pulses of self-desire bee-beeping in the imagined future. A last word, it is made the weight of literature, the litmus of experience-in-literature, if it is to be present. A pronounced word, its pronouncement is always a sentence. It liaises the two: the envisioned self to be confirmed and the inscription that confirms; and the harmless liaison is thought to be flow, recursive flow, contaminating, transmissible flow.¹ Its fluidity over-flows the fractures, flows

SHADOW

1. “The authenticity of a thing is all that is transmissible from its beginning, ranging from its substantive duration to its testimony to the history it has experienced.” (Benjamin 221) Yes, the flow extends over its history, while it makes it present as testimony. The verifiable, the veridical, the very similar patterns of attestation of things, as of selves.



over the cracks, observed, ignored, mollifies as hope flies in the face of interruption.

The fear of interruption, of signal loss between what has been written and what is to be confirmed as in-grown in the self. The signal, of course, would only attest that something *has* grown, from itself, from its organic potentiality to be itself.² Cleft hope: in indigenous potential, for one; in being apt to receive the external authority that would substantiate the actualization, the growing if not a mere growth.³

The evanescence of this hope in the transmissibility of the essential meets the diagnosis of what can be attested, in the thing as in the self, and the diagnosis seems final. But it is only in this final word, this final “fiat,”⁴ that the literary thing, like the human self, can be returned, in hope, to what was always there. It is only analogical.



It is not difficult to see that the two senses of authenticity – the artefactual and the existential – similar though they may be, follow different routes and routines. The first requires a specific type of authority (secondary to the authorial), whose role is to assert and attest. Expertise is criterion here; the accretion of specialised knowledge is entitlement. Expert is the bestower of authenticity.⁵ This verdict, while final, is inevitably end-stopped: artefactual genuineness is an end in itself.⁶ The second sense of authenticity, it seems, would require a specific type of transparency,⁷ a light magic needed,⁸ as if inwardness were optical, as if the innards were suddenly made transparent to peruse from outside, and *this* particular perception granted

2. All this, a rather prudent, a “phronetic” circumvention. Trying hard not to say existential. But: “The notion of authenticity can only be reached following the existential analysis which pointed from care to what was still outstanding such that we could put human beings in their entirety into sharper relief.” (O’Brien 29) Yes, ineluctable modality. For the remainder, H is He who shall not be named (or quoted).

3. Trying hard not say: “literature teaches.” Also, across the divide: “eine eigene Stimmung.”

4. Fiat! Thou art authentic.

5. Does he bestow, or does he merely confirm? This question of the *authentes* of authenticity is a difficult one.

6. It is also called “nominal authenticity”: “Denis Dutton argues that the use of the term ‘authentic’ in aesthetics groups into two categories. In this context, we may speak of *nominal authenticity* when establishing that a work of art is correctly identified in terms of origins, authorship, or provenance.” (Varga 1) And not only in aesthetics, one might add; this end-product, once confirmed, may be used and is entirely marketable and marketed.

7. “This construction, which is inspired by Kierkegaard’s doctrine of the ‘transparency’ of the self, would like to make possible a starting out from some element of being. This latter is valued as the immediate givenness of the facts of consciousness in traditional epistemology...” (Adorno 113)

8. Necessary in what is called “the inner sense model” (see Varga 61-3), or what might just as well be called the “unique snowflake model”: “There is a certain way of being human that is my way. I am called upon to live my life in this way, and not in imitation



direct access, in the past, now, and later, and instantly crystallised as knowledge. Such transparency being ever a mere figment, what it needs is in effect belief,⁹ or at least trust that such access is possible. The first sense of authenticity stops, and may be turned over for use, the second is ever a project, always a process, and, as such, also for use. The trust is misguided if the project works, for the autoscopic flow is made visible by external light, reflected, the outer radiance of outer authority.¹⁰ Where the two senses, which everyday usage keeps for separate occasions, cross each other,¹¹ is the place in which exteriority interjects as authority. And yet, with the second story,

the rejection of exteriority comes with the territory.¹²



The story of "from within" recirculates unspoiled; its desire is pure, because "true."¹³ Its incompleteness is marred not by despair, but entertained and entertaining as "work-in progress," projected as the yet-to-be-achieved. The limit is internal, and the domain's virtual extension virtually incalculable.¹⁴ The actual extension is unknown, but there is ubiquitous vulgarisation.¹⁵ There is, however, another unknown, the unknown process of self-actualization during play,

of anyone else's. But this gives a new importance to being true to myself. If I am not, I miss the point of my life, I miss what being human is for me" (Taylor 28-9), which Taylor credits to Herder.

9. "The genuineness of need and belief, which is questionable anyway, has to turn itself into the criterion for what is desired and believed; and in this way it becomes no longer genuine. This is the reason why no one can say the word 'genuineness' without becoming ideological." (Adorno 70)

10. "The edge is removed from the living subject's protest against being condemned to play roles." (Adorno 71) So it goes when there is protest or even the intimation of one, but often the edge of "role" is blurred over with the contour of "self."

11. Besides their both being "consumable" discourses, and consumed as "discourses", which can be kept, for now, in the shadow of this endnote.

12. "So the outer does indeed have significance for us, yet not as an expression of the inner but like a telegram telling of something hidden deep within." (Kierkegaard 173)

13. "Being true to myself means being true to my own originality, and that is something only I can articulate and discover. In articulating it, I am also defining myself. I am realizing a potentiality that is properly my own. This is the background understanding to the modern ideal of authenticity, and to the goals of self-fulfilment or self-realization in which it is usually couched." (Taylor 29) One should insist on the heavy word, "ideal", which pushes the story into its generic ethical authenticity.

14. Its operative limit, chief anxiety and principle of hope is the *noch nicht*, but that is almost never mentioned. Other limits vary, from Descartes's restriction of authenticity as validity to Rousseau's universalism.

15. "Fundamentally, authenticity is about you being you – fully. It's about being yourself – understanding, owning, acknowledging, appreciating, and expressing all of who



with its acts and happenings, the authentic economy of inflows and outflows, which can only be known in regurgitation. The ideal transparency of the (self)-knowing self coupled with the opacity in play that renders the actual actualization unobservable. Certainly to outside observers, to the curious inquirer, but perhaps also to the self-itself.¹⁶ Who could say, for instance, that such and such move of the self in relation to its own authentic play was going on right at that moment? Even after the fact, it can be stated, but can it be *observed*, was it observed? We are returned to the tryst of trust, appointed in the directness of

flow from within.¹⁷ This, we trust, turns authenticity from substantive into relational, formulates it as an expressive relation.¹⁸ If all manner of things shall be well, expression shall wax¹⁹ to its full sheen or genuine shine. In the accord of the inner and the outer there is a peculiar conflation of ethical sincerity and aesthetic radiance, if we are to jump ahead to other expressions, or otherwise contained basking in the self glow. Auratic²⁰ in either sense, but one should recognise that aura doesn't just wane; it also waxes back, is waxed back into expressions, and remains constantly, even undetected at times, as background radiation.

you are – both the light and the dark. Being authentic is one of the most challenging yet important aspects of our growth as human beings. It involves being totally honest about ourselves and with others. When we're authentic, we're vulnerable, aware, open, curious, and truthful above all else. We're in touch with our thoughts and our feelings, our doubts and our fears, our dreams and our passions, and so much more." (Robbins 7) Amusingly, these vulgarisations also set themselves as "exteriority", with every claim of being "inspirational", needing to be drawn like breath into emptier hence weaker selves.

16. "Our knowledge of what we are like on the inside is no more 'direct' or 'intuitive' than our knowledge of what things are like in the 'external world'." (Rorty qtd. in Varga 71)

17. "To say that a person is authentic is to say that his or her actions truly express what lies at their origin, that is, the dispositions, feelings, desires, and convictions that motivate them. Built into this conception of authenticity is a distinction between what is really going on within me – the emotions, core beliefs, and bedrock desires that make me the person I am – and the outer avowals and actions that make up my being in the public world." (Guignon 278)

18. In relation to aesthetics, "expressive authenticity" is Denis Dutton's term: "Additionally, we may speak of *expressive authenticity* when discussing the artifact's character being a genuine expression of the author's beliefs or central values in a given socio-historical context." (Varga 1)

19. "An old and merely fanciful etymology, *sine cera*, without wax, had in mind an object of *virtu* which was not patched up and passed off as sound, and serves to remind us that the word in its early use referred primarily not to persons but to things, both material and immaterial." (Trilling 12)

20. Of course, famously: "One might subsume the eliminated element in the term 'aura' and go on to say: that which withers in the age of mechanical reproduction is the aura of the work of art." (Benjamin 221) The authenticity of reconstructed aura falls under the



The story above is not yet the story of the subject as *plenum*. The subject as plenum has the self as balloon.²¹ From the subjacent to the inflatable, it is the hyperbole that goes beyond the ethical ideal of authenticity. The ethical is if not superseded then at least exceeded by poetical mobility. A hyperbolic fullness has no space within itself, and very little time and patience, for exteriority that is not organic and as alive as the subject is. Certainly no room for types of transmission or transmissibility, tradition of all kinds, scripturality of all

sorts, which stress their exteriority in relation to the individual self.²² The very direction of confirmation reverses the dynamics so that *expression*²³ becomes the mark of authority and authentication.

In letting out its inner authentic mark, its afflatus, the self deflates. Its elasticity wanes,²⁴ and in its impermanence it romances the two antagonistic Romantic drives: individuation and elemental dispersion. Ideally, this is a romance of organic coalescence, bringing together the observer and the partaker in a hyperbolic posture.²⁵ A Romantic, thus a modern²⁶ play, its fossilized skeleton is laid bare in

same injunction in Adorno's analysis: "As words that are sacred without sacred content, as frozen emanations, the terms of the jargon of authenticity are products of the disintegration of the aura." (Adorno 9-10) What is curious is that the "felt quality" of reconstructed auras still endures; they still captivate, the mystique, so to speak, is "alive."

21. Whitmanian mantras, such as "absorbing all to myself" and "I contain multitudes", come to mind.

22. Emerson's beginning of "Nature" illustrates this, with the heavily asymmetrical distinctions between "history" and "insight", "them" and "us", "past" and "present." An "original relation to the universe", Emerson says, and even the dictionary retains "original" as a basic note in the composition of authenticity, extending back toward the origin, and forward towards the new.

23. "Writing and talk do not prove me,/ I carry the plenum of proof and every thing else in my face,/ With the hush of my lips I wholly confound the skeptic." Expression doesn't even need to be articulation, not even voice yet, the *face* as place of immediate authentic expression carries (interesting choice of verb by Whitman) the plenum. Fullness flattened, then, on the face, its depth – virtual, un-seen.

24. Inflation is followed by necessary deflation, as the flow and "overflow" ("a voice overflowing with presence," Bloom calls it, 187), the "influx and efflux" give way to dissipation, and self scattering in the elements.

25. Emerson in his essay "Nature": "Standing on the bare ground, my head bathed by the blithe air, and uplifted into infinite space, all mean egotism vanishes. I become a transparent eye-ball; I am nothing; I see all; the currents of the Universal Being circulate through me; I am part or particle of God."

26. "This idea has entered very deep into modern consciousness. It is also new. Before the late eighteenth century no one thought that the differences between human beings had this kind of moral significance." (Taylor 28)



the two distinctions that support not only the ideal, but any talk of authenticity reverberating to our times: the distinction between inner and outer, and the distinction between what is “alive” and what is – not dead – but devivified. These distinctions are asymmetrical (because already morally connoted²⁷ when play begins) and dynamised: the inner thrust outward is accompanied by vivification.²⁸ Exposed as *distinctions*, they are perhaps etherized, slowed down enough to discern their operative quality; but when they were, when they are at play, their just-so motion blur is felt quality, like strings vibrating, imperceptible, precluding precision. In this state, excisions of aura may be exercised,²⁹ but they feel “unnatural,” unwelcome, lethal. They feel like vivisections.



With felt quality, one goes by either sensation or trust. The evanescence of sensation – as “moment” – is built into the Romantic³⁰ romance of authentic being. Ecstatic moment, ek-static, outside time and also, somehow, outside the self, the fullness of the felt as original, primary, ultimate criterion. Beyond mere rational ecology, the subject as partaker, exceeded, minuscule, transparent. Beyond solipsisms of joys, the indifferent ecology of self scattering.³¹ This is a maximalist story, as becomes a hyperbolic subject, but when sensations are lost, its recirculated relics are auratically injected to the max, from potential to project, from empowerment to growth, a reliquary of moments revived as continuous

27. Interiority, good; exteriority, bad. I simplify, but I jest, not. The story of the authentic favours interiority, or at least it has for a very long time. Adorno calls it out as “liturgy of inwardness.”

28. From the very beginning: “Every human form brings to life an individual germ in the beholder. This gaze becomes infinite thereby – it is bound up with a feeling of inexhaustible power – and therefore it vivifies so absolutely. As we behold ourselves – we give ourselves life.” (Novalis 41) Novalis’s fragment is not merely typical for the future career of this idea, it is *archetypal*. Note that for Novalis the vivifying gaze is *specular*. Also, that the knot between gaze and feeling is no mere nexus, but rather like fused circuitry. The gaze and the feeling – the immeasurably fused within.

29. “But if inwardness is neither an existent thing nor an aspect – no matter how general – of the subject, then it turns into an imaginary quantity. [...] In the jargon, finally, there remains from inwardness only the most external aspect, that thinking oneself superior which marks people who elect themselves: the claim of people who consider themselves blessed simply by virtue of being what they are.” (Adorno 75)

30. Its survival and recirculation is, as one would expect, “neo-romantic”: “This individualistic and inward notion of authenticity (or ‘who I really am’ behind the numerous veneers) has a definite history as a number of commentators have shown (see Berman, 1970; Taylor, 1992; Guignon, 2004). It coincides with the neo-romantic reconstitution of the individual as the unique site of immediate experience, an original self that cannot be reduced to abstract a priori categories.” (Fleming 26)

31. “I bequeath myself to the dirt...” et cetera.



"challenge."³² Or worse, daily exercise.³³ In the inspirational jargon, others figure as potential clones and clones of potential, unconvinced or seduced or rapt in merry *imitatio*, with success rate measurable (like in the case of weight loss or giving up smoking) but really unknown, immaterial as subjective structure of feeling. We expect nothing more there, perhaps, but from its beginnings³⁴ the maximalist story is haunted by a lack, by its becoming an ellipsis of others, a living monadic fossil,³⁵ and this is an ethical concern, a serious question.³⁶ So much so that one interpretation of the

word itself – interesting albeit incorrect – attempts to bury intersubjectivity back into the etymon itself.³⁷

Regardless of the subject's closure or openness, irrespective of its irritability or indifference, authenticity reaches us clustered around the distinctions that connect the self to life and expression, and that are used in the aftermath of the selfsame story – illicitly perhaps – to connect expression (as mark of the inner thrust outwards) and life, and imbue the connection with the selfsame aura that surrounds the subject.³⁸ Felt quality is thus relocated in

32. Oh, Mike: "We often know exactly what we need to do to make positive changes in our lives – to get in touch with who we are; to know our truth; and to see, feel, and recognize what's authentic for us. However, it's a totally different thing to act on this, speak it out loud, and make a commitment to live in a way that is true to ourselves – which is what's necessary if we're going to expand our ability to be ourselves and be authentic." (Robbins 229)

33. Eheu, Mike: "It's a great idea to go back through the book and your notes and pick out a handful of the exercises, techniques, or practices that were mentioned or that you completed. You can also think of other actions or practices that you can take, related to authenticity – ones that you know will work for your unique personality and style." (Robbins 230)

34. One can sense this in Novalis's fragments – the Romantic (in fact, much older) absolutism that eclipses the subject under the shadow of "every human form."

35. With Thoreau as patron, Emerson as chief theoretician.

36. "Authenticity seems once more to be defined here in a way that centres on the self, which distances us from our relations to others. And this has been seized on by the critics I quoted earlier. Can one say anything about this in reason?" (Taylor 44) For theoretical treatments of authenticity in relation to intersubjectivity, see Taylor (144-69, 99-108), Ferrara (13-21), Fleming (136-156).

37. *All* identities arise from interaction, but *authentic* identities have a distinctive quality. In Greek "authentikós" derives from "eautón" and "theto," where "theto" is etymologically related to "thesis." Thus "authentic" refers to individuals who "posit themselves" or, more freely, "set themselves as a thesis." Such an act of "positing oneself," however, must also be understood along intersubjective lines: namely, as the capacity to express that *uniqueness* which has been socially constituted through the singularity and uniqueness of the formative contexts but which no formative social context as such can enjoin us to express. (Ferrara 15)



the sensation that expression is “alive”; and indeed the self suffers a curiouser and curiouser elision. It vanishes or is absorbed – an improbable self-absorption, the inverse of what one normally understands by the narcissistic phrase – in expression.³⁹ Introspection fades not merely because the “inner” turns opaque, but because it is no longer there, no longer “inner.”



The vanishing point of interiority has less to do with observability and transparency than with belief in the authenticity of expression, even in the absence of an inner source. As the aura passes on to light the last position of the ek-static subject, darkness falls upon the “within.”⁴⁰ Who today addresses this question to inner space: “am I authentic”? Who still attempts, even as

jocund Cartesian simulation, think it fecund enough to follow the inner folds of that question? Can I even ask myself what happens to me when I say “I am authentic”? I can, evidently – even if I may cause stifled laughter – but for the answer to make sense the observation is directed elsewhere. It isn’t just jest: the whole Romantic tale, the complete romance is turned inside-out, like a glove, only to find that the inside has always been the outside.⁴¹ Whose interiority has not been reconstructed by myriad bits and bytes, myriad irritations from the outside, myriad facets of the same irritation? Is this the glove that slaps the cheek of the utterer of mantras of inwardness? Is it – this theory of the generative outside – also not our own present hyperbole? Our present, our presence; our immediate, authentic, social⁴² observational surface. ’Tis.⁴³

38. The auratic contamination is discernible even early on: “Each work of literature must be a living individual.” (Novalis 55) This analogy has trickled all the way down modern literature, and it sometimes ceases to be an analogy, as can also be seen in the quote below.

39. “This suggests right away a close analogy, even a connection, between self-discovery and artistic creation. With Herder, and the expressivist understanding of human life, the relation becomes very intimate. Artistic creation becomes the paradigm mode in which people can come to self-definition.” (Taylor 61-2)

40. “The reflection on inwardness, the positing of it together with an element of its becoming, points to its real abolition.” (Adorno 72)

41. “Consciousness cannot communicate itself because every communication is always already autopoietic components of a social system.” (Luhmann 21)

42. Compounding Luhmann’s meaning of the term “social”, but also the vulgarised “social”, as in “social network.”

43. This old problem wanes: “The reconciliation between the inner and outer worlds, which Hegelian philosophy still hoped for, has been postponed ad infinitum. Thus it has become unnecessary to advocate alienation, since the latter is in power anyway, as the law of those who are happy extroverts. At the same time the consciousness of the rupture becomes more and more unbearable. For slowly this rupture changes self-consciousness into self-deception.” (Adorno 72) In choosing the word “alienation” for Adorno’s *Entäußerung*, the English translation doesn’t exactly get it wrong, but it doesn’t get it right



The vanishing point of interiority is moot. Muted under continuous communicative irritation. Buried under plastic reconstruction in the image, the eidolon of what an authentic self should be but never was. What about flow, though? The change in the sense of the relation as flow displaces the authentic, which is now contained in its end, an entelechy felt there, not observed, but known, indemonstrably.

*Ceci n'est pas une histoire.*⁴⁴



In either case, the background radiation of spent radiance is authored, and it is also authoring. The subject as self author, the author as still radiating remnant. A remnantology of retrojects. Its jets are picked up empathetically by other authoring projects, the ensuing process not as flow from one to another, but perhaps as attunement, analogy, or imitation. It is here that felt quality returns, completes its loop where exteriority once again kindles desire

for internalization by *immitatio*. There is no arguing with this structure of feeling; affect in its affecting quality will obscure the accompanying mythologies of effect and affect, proximity and intensity that observation would lay bare. There is a nexus of the "lived" and the "felt," of immediacy desired as a shadow cast over a whole range of operations, a legion of irritations at the "micro" level. A cast of affect over the dynamics of self authoring. Does this overshadowing render one's authenticity suspect? As long as no one asks the questions to themselves, no one cares.

What is suspect, if not unexpected, is the commerce between the two meanings, between the self as metaphoric athanor of its own authenticity and the making reserved for the *authententes*, the one who makes out of their own "authority."⁴⁵ A certain understanding of literature "lives" upon this thin tenuous layer where different language games superimpose, as if meaning the same thing. As if their intentionality were one, beyond the poetics of self and

either. "Alienation" is indeed the word most commonly used to translate *Entäußerung*, and while it stays perhaps true to Adorno's spirit and is also the most concussive politically, alienation moves away from "Hegel's plea" (*die Fürsprache*) for what is merely "externalisation" or "exteriorisation." The externalisation turns out to be alienation, estrangement (as of property, one might say), and consequently self-deception (*Selbstbetrug*), is a critical reading that does not often figure in the reconstituted selves of "happy extroverts." Structures of feeling happily trump critical reflection. But reflection may go on to observe the economic connotation of "externalization" as in "something else is doing the job that used to be done by you."

44. "When we attempt to trace the history of the self, we of course know that we are dealing with shadows in a dark land." (Trilling 54)

45. "We must also examine the closely related nouns *authententia* (later translated as 'power'), *authententes* (after the New Testament period, 'master'), and the adjective *authententikos*, which still survive in English as 'authentic' (Kroeger 12). The shadows of the word darken as we journey backwards. As Kroeger concludes: "The verb *authententein* is thus peculiarly apt to describe both the erotic and the murderous" (Kroeger 14).



its exuviae. The conflation of these two intentionalities has survived its Romantic infancy to float up vulgarised as “reading.”⁴⁶ Reading other selves by reading other’s authored selves, which is the authority fused to their authoriality, and makes one’s self at least *authentēs*, if not *authentikós*.

Every “one” is turned into their own reading and read material – subject.



Where does this leave literature, our problem? Literature is being left as a problem for a theory of authenticity. Or, conversely, authenticity as always (already?)⁴⁷ out of leftfield or literature. This recursive loop that never seems to find the redemptive inlet of the “lived,” the redeemed outlet of the “as good as lived,” outside of unsatisfactory theories of proximity and “as if.” The history of authenticity – a humanist

drive – in literature is shadow-play along long lines such as those observed here. It can be expounded upon in play or in earnest, whereas observations here are modestly post-play brought to the fore.

The “being left,” a state, as the problem of the residual existence of literature. Also, more recently, the being left behind by other, shinier, touchier, more connected self extensions. What began as vivifying flow, surging from the undoubted – though doubtable – impetus of the inner as core is now disposable outmoded information support. It should be noted, still, that it is only a sizeable dosage of historicity injected in the observation that makes it appear so: another drive, to see historical process where perhaps there is none.

To answer, to wit: it leaves it in a state, a double state: as concretion of models for absorption, and as predilect vehicle (and vicus) for regurgitation and recirculation.

46. “The true reader must be an extension of the author. He is the higher court that receives the case already prepared by the lower court.” (Novalis 45) The idea of the fragment survives well into the 20th century mythologies of reading, see Nabokov’s “Good readers and good writers.”

47. No. Authenticity wasn’t always a “problem” for literature, nor was it required or even thought of. It emerges – in the historical intentionality of “literature” – around the emergence of a project of self that can be deemed “modern.”

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