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Nondual Writing

A Perspective on Who Owns Ideas, and a Way to Write with Greater Ease

Andrew Erdman[1]

Abstract:
The act of writing can cause great anxiety, stoking flames of perfectionism and fears of criticism, narcissistic injury, or indifference. While Buddhist teachings provide liberation from such egoic loneliness, it is not often recognized that postmodern and post-structural thought may also put the "author" and their "writing" in a less-individualized context—one in which a written work is understood to be in fact an ongoing *process* taking shape in interactions among writer, reader, critic, fan, and the world of literature at large. Keeping such a model in mind can help return joy to the act of writing as it poses the question, "To whom does this work belong?"

Keywords: Buddhism; nondualism; postmodernism; deconstruction; Derrida.

It turns out the Buddhists may have been on to something long before the postmodernists and deconstructionists. In particular, I am thinking of the idea that a written expression such as a novel, an article, a poem, or even a Tweet, may not in fact *belong* to an *individual*. This essay, which in some sense *belongs* to me but, as I hope to show, in fact resides in the totality of thoughts and ideas *about* this essay, will argue that Buddhistic, nondual perspectives not only align with influential contemporary theories of literary criticism and philosophy, but can also give hope to "writers" who struggle with procrastination, perfectionism, or simply old-fashioned writer's "block," all of which reflect egoic distortions about *possessing* textual works. Along the way, I will draw on my training as a psychotherapist to show how some innovative treatments influenced by postmodern literary theory (yes, *literary* theory) can help alleviate the burden-of-self that leads to anxieties when trying to write—or deal with other burdens and struggles which life visits upon us. Indeed, whether one is struggling with composing a fictional short story, or struggling with accepting painful plot points in one's "own story," much is to be gained by making room for nondual and post-structural wisdom. (I use "post-structural" as an umbrella term that includes what others might call postmodern, deconstructionist, and even postcolonial philosophies.)

Most contemporary Buddhists would admit that the individual ego, while often perilous for failing to see its own limited nature, is nonetheless helpful as an interim construct, particularly if kept in proper check. The ego is cranky and problematic, but not inherently "evil" (Bhikkhu, 2020). In fact, the ego is demonstrably essential in paving the way toward a broader, deeper recognition of the underlying, unified consciousness that informs the experience of nondualism. By tussling with egoic mental formations and the feelings and discomfort they engender, people may be led to nondual practices that relieve them, at least momentarily, of those

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struggles as they glimpse the ego's ongoing attempts at mental tyranny. As legendary Tibetan Buddhist teacher Chögyam Trungpa (2003) wrote in his essay, "The Development of the Ego," the seemingly individuated, egoic perspective can give way to a broader recognition that we are connected via a subterranean aquifer of totality: "Fundamentally there is just open space, the *basic ground*, what we really are" (p. 74). Other, non-Buddhist schools of thought also posit the fundamental interrelatedness of people and processes. Some are explicitly non-spiritual, such as Marxism, while others, like that of Twelve Step recovery, have a clearly spiritual approach and say so.

Send in the Poststructuralists

Around the same time as Western-born pioneers such as Ram Dass, Sharon Salzberg, Jack Kornfield and others were starting to channel Eastern wisdom to the West, scholars and critical thinkers were questioning basic principles of the academy. A new wave of intellectuals began openly wondering whether the time-honored practice of looking at an author and his or her intentions was really the best way to explore and understand a work of literature. While protest movements were upending long-held fixtures of authority, this wave of thinkers and critics argued that looking for the "truth" of a written work by decoding the author's intent was a fool's errand which only supported existing power structures and conventional worldviews, not to mention protecting the place of professors as the high priests of the ivory tower. Famed postmodern philosopher Roland Barthes (1977) helped erode the authority of the author, as it were, by arguing that authorship as we have come to know it is largely a construct of "capitalist ideology, which has attached the greatest importance to the 'person' of the author" (p. 143). Teaching and instruction, as Barthes rightly observed—and as many a former pupil of high school and college lit classes will attest—typically proceeded from the assumption that the "*explanation* of a work is always [to be] sought in the man or woman who produced it," as though the author were "'confiding' in us" (p. 143). And who would not want the temporary pleasure of "figuring out" or decoding the complexities of a Godlike author's thoughts, thereby accessing a loftier, more privileged interpretation of the world? Indeed, to be confided-in, winked-at by the high-standing, solitary writer, whose ideas require a kind of Rosetta Stone deftly handled by experts, seems like a stimulating experience. It can feel like hitting a vein of valuable ore reached only by churning laboriously through layers of topsoil, crust, and bedrock. Of course, this usually also means forgetting about enjoying what you're reading, be it a book or poem. Barthes's argument shows us that the traditional model almost sets up reader and book as adversaries, the former assaulting the latter and forcing it to give up its secrets.

While Barthes proclaimed "the death of the author," his fellow Frenchman Michel Foucault (1977/1969), the influential post-structural scholar, cheekily asked, "What is an author?" in a famous essay. According to Foucault, the fantasy of a single, truth-declaiming individual "which we designate as an author" was little more than a set of "projections," functioning as might the term *Big Dipper* when applied to a group of stars by the limited, fallible, but highly creative human mind. Foucault proposed that the "author-function" propagated in Western literary culture was not the sole source of knowledge about the so-called meaning of a piece of writing. Understanding the

psychology or the intent of the writer did not equal understanding the truths contained within the text. For Foucault, the "author-function" was rejected, or at least strongly questioned, as a site of privileged, self-sustaining truth. Rather, the "author" was something "formed spontaneously through the simple attribution of a discourse to an individual," a somewhat naïve, almost unconscious process that most people never questioned. Highly conditioned socioeconomic and psychological impulses led people to unwittingly "form a complex operation whose purpose is to construct the rational entity we call an author" (p. 307). Doing this, as I have suggested, maintains the conformist hierarchy which keeps society bound in a thicket of unequal power relations. More importantly for our purposes, the "rational entity we call an author" reinforces the notion that the truth begins and ends with a contained, individualized ego we call a "self," and to which we cling, particularly when its existence is called into question. And the harder we cling, the more difficult it is to connect with the creative joy of writing and reading.

To me, Foucault's "rational entity we call an author" sounds quite similar to the bounded, egoic entity we often call the "self." Following on Foucault, why might we need to invent, or at least actively fantasize about, an "author"? Different parties might offer different explanations. To an egoically-conditioned Westerner, there is a certain comfort in considering the privacy and primacy of one's own ideas. If, according to the Cartesians, "I think therefore I am," the more thought content one has, the more one exists—or it sure feels like it, anyway. Having a third party witness my thoughts amplifies this experience of self: if you notice that some ideas are *mine* and assign them to *me*, I may feel exposed and accountable, but least I *exist*. *Phew*.

The paradox here, of course, is that for "me" to exist as an author, I need you to be a reader, a responder. You, the reader, become a mirror of my existence, so I'm saved from the niggling anxiety, the "gnawing feeling" (Purser, 2012, p. 21), of non-self, even if there is a transactional cost in the form of evaluative thoughts like *I'm-not-good-enough* or *I'm-not-talented* which can readily arise when others respond to our writing.

For Marxists and others who doubt that the current social order is "natural" but rather, see it as a result of willful undertakings by powerful and better-resourced groups, conferring the status of "great author" on a writer helps reinforce that social order and the processes whereby status is formulated and conferred. The Great Experts using their Approved Methods help differentiate the trivial from the profound, the truthful from the fantastical.* Bertolt Brecht, the famed playwright and socialist, understood this and created dramatic works intended to show audiences their role as active makers of meaning; he didn't want them to become passive recipients of compelling but illusory "truths" about society and psychology. As such, Brecht

* It is interesting to note, I think, that at a point in Western history when long-dominant groups find themselves having to share authority, it is those very groups who have upended the discourses of science, expertise, and specialization as suspect "fake news" or "elite science."

(1964) proposed various aesthetic elements, from scenography to dramaturgy, to encourage "alienation"—i.e., making the familiar and well-worn start to seem unfamiliar, arbitrary, constructed. He wanted theatre audiences to see that although their reality may be "taken for granted," it was nonetheless "not just natural" (p. 125).

Letting Go the Burden of Being a "Writer"

I can think of few more egoically sticky undertakings than writing. Something about committing words to page in the often isolated physical and mental space of the writer's atelier binds me to those *words*; they become a powerful chunk of "self" which I covet like Tolkien's Gollum clutching his ring. Even though, as a writer, I have been edited and critiqued by others to the vast improvement of the product, getting feedback from other humans brings up an immediate, subjective experience of shock and invasion. My ego is poked and it responds as though coated in a thin but well-formed membrane pierced by the researcher's lancet. *Ouch*. My years of Buddhist practice (or attempts at it, anyway), as well as other forms of healing and recovery, help me to desist from grabbing the "second arrow" of judgment, blame, shame, and so forth, which would usually lead to attacking myself or the feedback-giver. I have learned simply to listen, even if I feel discomfort, and let the reader share their thoughts and feelings. It requires practice, actively holding space for my emotions and sensations while letting the feedback unfold. It makes for a lot of squirming, like a child on a long car ride who has consumed one too many juice boxes. The first arrow, the "ouch" of hearing another give their thoughts about the good and bad of what I have written, is automatic and unavoidable, at least at this point in my spiritual development. But the second arrow of reactive judgment—and that second arrow has been a brutal projectile in my life—remains un-grasped when I simply let myself squirm, responding with openness and compassion. When I practice listening and conscious nonreactivity to others' thoughts on my writing, I usually discover that some of what I hear "sticks" and proves helpful, while other aspects fall away. That's okay too. "Take what you like and leave the rest," as I have heard it said.

In fact, the more I practice open non-reactivity to what I have written, the more I start to see a deeper truth, one that feels both calming and exciting as it broadens my mental horizon. This consists in coming to understand that my written utterances may not really belong to *me*, at least in a way I have long believed. Perhaps my ideas come "through me," as bestselling author Elizabeth Gilbert pointed out in her viral TED talk some years back. But do they originate with me? Moreover, do others' responses constitute a kind of attack on what I have written? Or might there be a different way of looking at things altogether? Indeed, does the written work even
"end" when it is published; can it ever be finished? Is it in a kind of ongoing conversation with readers and fans and critics and my own mental formations? In summoning these questions, I feel the interweaving influences of nondualism and poststructuralism. In fact, while the text that is coming-into-being may draw a crucial breath from my inner creative source, that utterance, that text, takes worldly shape only as a constellation of reactions, opinions, vectors of feedback, and all of what might be called *responses* in the minds, voices, and words of others. All of which is not to suggest that those responses or their sources

are authoritative, more truthful, more original and so forth. They too are contingent, formed in time, systemic, and ever arising and changing.

Keeping all this in mind as a writer lets me proceed from a place of internal creativity, love, and inspiration, and to view the entire process of feedback, from friends' comments to editors' requests to readers' reactions, as a further, holistic shaping of a text that never was and never will be finished. I may therefore approach what used to be an agonizing, ego-slaying labor with an attitude of curiosity, gratitude, and acceptance. The squirmy, frightened author-entity in me of course needs attention in the form of acceptance and space. Meditation and related tools increasingly allow me to do just that.

Deconstructing Writer's Block

Few might think of Jacques Derrida, the francophone, Algerian-born academic who developed the term "deconstruction," as an ideological ally of nondualism and Buddhism. After all, because Buddhism promotes, on the one hand, transcendent truths—for example, "Only by loving kindness is animosity dissolved. This law is ancient and eternal" (Bercholz & Kohn, 2003, p. 67)—Buddhistic beliefs may be seen as contrary to the understanding that specific groups and temporally-located social and economic forces are the real drivers of human behavior. Derrida and his school, broadly speaking, would likely argue that anything we are told is "eternal" or "naturally arising" out of human nature might in fact be illusory spells that serve the interests of the powerful and anesthetize the weak, making the latter complicit in their own subjugation. Indeed, Marxian political theorists, echoing the work of Italian social critic Antonio Gramsci, like to speak of "hegemony," a force which imposes "apparent consent" and censures acts of protest such as kneeling during the National Anthem because such enactments betray the "underlying power relations" that shape society (see: Scott, 1990, p. 205). Of course, it might also be pointed that Buddhists have long observed the deep, unconscious effects of "causes and conditions," and how these vectors of influence shape what people think is "normal" or expectable; in this regard, the Buddha was perhaps the original Marxist.

As for Derrida, while many might take the term "deconstruction" to mean simply taking-apart, dismantling, or separating into composite pieces, the word and the concept it reflects actually have a much deeper, more compelling definition—one that is consonant, in my view, with nondualist, diminished-egoic approaches to writing, creativity and, ultimately, life itself.

Derrida makes for difficult reading. So it's a good thing that wise and patient individuals have explained his concepts in more potable language. As legal scholar and gifted Derrida-explainer J. M. Balkin (1987) notes, Jacques Derrida's writing style is "self-consciously obscure and self-referential" (p. 746). Balkin rightly observes that many "who use the word 'deconstruction' regard it as no more than another expression for 'trashing'." But, Balkin points out, deconstruction is a practice, perhaps like meditation or the mindful observation of self, something which is not an end or truth in itself but rather, a path to deeper clarity. Deconstruction works via "the identification of hierarchical oppositions" that comprise so much of the unquestioned bedrock of our knowledge and worldview particularly in the

West. For Derrida, a prejudicial distortion he calls "the metaphysics of presence" runs deeply and unconsciously, or semi-consciously, through so much of what we believe to be self-evident or "foundational" (pp. 747, 749). Deconstruction reveals those self-evident "truths" as, in fact, highly contingent, relational, and not so monolithic after all. In particular, deconstruction reveals how entities related in a hierarchy or within a binary set are in fact irrevocably dependent on one another for their respective place and import, and that each could not exist without the other. For the written word, say, to be considered more important than spoken or oral utterances, it is essential that the concept of "the written word" have an opposite or at least lesser form to which to compare itself. And vice-versa. The more one looks at dualistic pairs, notably those that stand in binary opposition or hierarchical ranking to one another, the more we see each concept's essential reliance on the *other* for its *own* existence. According to Derrida, the fiction of an individual entity's self-contained identity is belied by a quality he labels *differance*, a neologism that combines the concepts of differing-*from* and yet deferring-*to*. In a binary pair, each party bears ineradicable traces of the other and also refers to the other in ways that make it impossible for each idea or entity to exist wholly on its own, much as we might wish to believe otherwise. As Balkin explains, "neither term of the opposition can be originary and fundamental because both are related to each other in a system of mutual dependences and differences" (p. 752). To give a common example: in outwardly differing-*from* jokes and folk stories circulated informally, "classic" books and other written literature also inescapably *rely on* and therefore defer-*to* those more popular, oral genres. And the reverse is true too.

Perhaps readers will grasp why I might find this Derridean insight, which is destabilizing yet revelatory, relevant to the nondualist. If we expand our perspective to include not just binaries such as "art" and "entertainment" or "majority" and "minority," but to glimpse the myriad fabric of all things, we may see the interrelatedness of *differance* at a profound level. In a sense, we can deconstruct reality itself and appreciate the fundamentally interwoven quality of all its entities. Whether a writer struggling with perfectionistic blockage or a human struggling to bring compassionate acceptance to themself and others, a deconstructive perspective can help relieve egoic myopia. As the nondualist-influenced philosopher Arthur Schopenhauer wrote two hundred years ago, "If that veil of Maya, the *principium individuationis*, is lifted from the eyes of a man to such an extent that he no longer makes the egoistical distinction between himself and the person of others… such a man [will recognize] in all beings his own true innermost self" (2010/1819, pp. 233-234). Forgiving Schopenhauer's paternalistic language, we can see how it is possible to "deconstruct" relationships between family members, cultural groups, states, and all aspects of the world itself. As Derrida (1978) noted, "within structure there is not only form, relation, and configuration, [but there] is also interdependency and a totality which is always concrete" (p.5). It is a well-worn concept in psychotherapy, for example, that two people who trigger one another into deep and painful conflict on a regular basis are not so much *opposed* to one another but rather, deeply and powerfully *interconnected*. Indeed, with the aid of a skilled therapist, such parties may begin to see how their relationship can be used for healing and growth rather than as a setting for a cyclical conflict and distress (Feldman, 2009).

Famed Buddhist teacher Thich Nhat Hanh (1994) has written that "the next Buddha may be a Sangha," by which he meant that our collective, communal experience on the path toward enlightenment may supplant the role of the esteemed, singular teacher or individual, as authority structures give way to evolving mutuality arrangements in our world. If so, it reflects a holistic rather than individualistic determination of "the truth," much as Foucault, Barthes, and others might champion. It may also be seen that neither leader nor led can exist without the other, each residing in a state of deconstructive—and, I would say, nondualistic—*differance* to the other.

From Writing to Psychotherapy… and Back Again

Post-structural, systems-based—i.e., prospectively nondualist—teachings have played a key role in my training as a psychotherapist. In graduate school, I was taught to think about people's struggles not just in individual, psychological terms, but in *systems* terms as well. That is, I was taught to wonder: What interwoven situations and structures have informed a person's or a group's experiences and might thus contribute to their "sociocultural risk"? And how might awareness of this risk and its drivers help bring about change and relief? (Garbarino, 1992, pp. 22-23). In one of my first jobs after social work school, I served on a team of mental health specialists who visited patients in their own— that is, the *patients' own*—homes and communities. We were trained in an intervention called the Need-Adapted Treatment Model (NATM, for short) which had been developed in Scandinavia for people suffering from psychosis. NATM held that therapists, psychiatrists, and other so-called helping professionals would join-with the individual suffering the mental illness and collaboratively make sense of the patient's thoughts, feelings, and experiences. The patient, plus family, friends, and other helpers, along with our team jointly cultivated knowledge about the problem and proposed solutions. The British Psychological Society (2014) championed such an approach, looking at therapy as a "collaborative alliance":

> In the past[,] services have been based on what might be called a "paternalistic" approach—the idea that professionals know best and their job is to give advice. The "patient's" role is to obey the advice ("compliance"). This now needs to change. Rather than giving advice, those of us who work in services should think of ourselves as collaborators with the people we are trying to help (p. 104).

At the heart of NATM is a technique known as Open Dialogue. Open Dialogue is termed a

"dialogic approach" by its creators, because looks at the *interplay of many voices* rather than a top-down authority to come up with help for a mental illness sufferer. Open Dialogue aims to "create a shared language that permits the meanings of the person's suffering to become more lucid within the immediate network;" it "allows every person to enter the conversation in his or her own way" (Seikkula & Olson, 2003, p. 410).

A surprising influence on the developers on Open Dialogue, rather than well-known names from the psychiatric canon, was that of a midcentury Russian literary critic Mikhail Bakhtin. Bakhtin, influential in the realm of the academy but little known outside of it, examined the works of Rabelais, Dostoevsky, Gogol, and other writers. In their works, Bakhtin found that, rather than a single, dominant voice of authoritative truth, there emerged ideas and wisdom formed by many intersecting and interacting voices—including those of "common" persons without high position or status. For Bakhtin, this literature, Dostoevsky's in particular, was therefore "polyphonic," in that it rejected "all privileged points of view that claim access to superior positions of knowledge, power, and authority." In a sense, it was radically democratic. In Gogol's literature, Bakhtin noted that the "absence of a single authoritarian indisputable language, characteristic of the Renaissance," but instead, an "organization of a thoroughgoing and detailed interaction of verbal spheres" (Bakhtin & Sollner, 1983, p. 44).

Letting-go of a need for hierarchical certainty, often linked the to the ego's bid to survive unchallenged, permits greater space, curiosity, and a kind of discursive softness in the treatment setting. The New York City Department of Health and Mental Hygiene, which hired our team to bring NATM/Open Dialogue treatment to the Bronx and elsewhere, stated that a treatment based on "dialogism" had the advantage of creating greater "tolerance of uncertainty" for suffering individuals and their families (NYC Dept. of Health & Mental Hygiene, 2015, p. 16). Needless to say, Buddhist nondualism helps people tolerate the inherent uncertainty of life, whether one is considered mentally ill or not. It allows meaning to emerge while one focuses on the qualitative nature of experience rather than the narrative content applied to life by the mind.

Whose Idea Is It Anyway?

In my many years writing, as I have suggested, my egoic self has winced with pain again and again when receiving, or *per*ceiving, the seeming slings and arrows of others' feedback, from friends to editors to readers, not to mention my own distorting mental mirror. It is as if I begin with the notion that there is a perfect idea lodged in my head, and my task is to mine it out with great effort, then present it as fully-formed as possible to the would-be buyer. Via a process that often feels willful, strenuous, and at times rigidly organized, I eventually produce something—only to have it so often received in a way that shatters some small part of my belief structure. I have become good-enough at hiding the emotional turbulence that ensues in my person, of course. But boy is it uncomfortable. In making a shift, however, to a nondualist approach, one informed by postmodern, deconstructionist, and systems-oriented perspectives, I begin to see myself instead as a curious shepherd, one who brings an idea forth—an idea that is both creative and yet not completely original—and lets it out into the interplay of voices, impressions, additions, and occasional rotten tomatoes that might collectively be called "the reader." In this regard, I engage in a kind of Open Dialogue with the world. Some of those who engage with my work may respond from their own place of egoic stickiness, perhaps offering authoritative or harsh responses that can be off-putting to me or trigger shame and doubt. But when

viewing the process through the post-structural/nondualist lens, I can: i. Appreciate that such a reader/responder likely has their own hurtable and defensive ego, and thus remain open to helpful feedback without taking it so personally; ii. Focus on the nature and quality of what receiving feedback *feels like* rather than entering into various imagined narratives—"I suck," or "My writing sucks," or "That idiot doesn't know what they're talking about," and so on; and iii. Consider that I, as well as my readers/responders, are *serving the underlying idea or utterance in the writing rather than demanding that it serve me.* My effort is to shepherd this utterance into the world; it need not pay me back with accolades or royalties (though these are nice, of course, when they happen). In fact, the less I insist on such results, the more I enjoy the wonder, the wholeness, and the beautiful mystery of cultivating ideas with my true coauthors: the rest of humanity and of Life itself.

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