Does Writing have a Future?

Literary Theory for Large Language Models

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“Writing, in the sense of placing letters and other marks one after the other appears to have little or no future. Information is now more effectively transmitted by codes other than those of written signs. What was once written can now be conveyed more effectively on tapes, records, films, videotapes, videodisks, or computer disks.”

Vilém Flusser. *Does Writing Have a Future?* 1987.

OpenAI

Generative Pre-trained Transformer

Google

Bidirectional Encoder Representations from Transformers

ANTHROP\C

Claude

“Constitutional AI”

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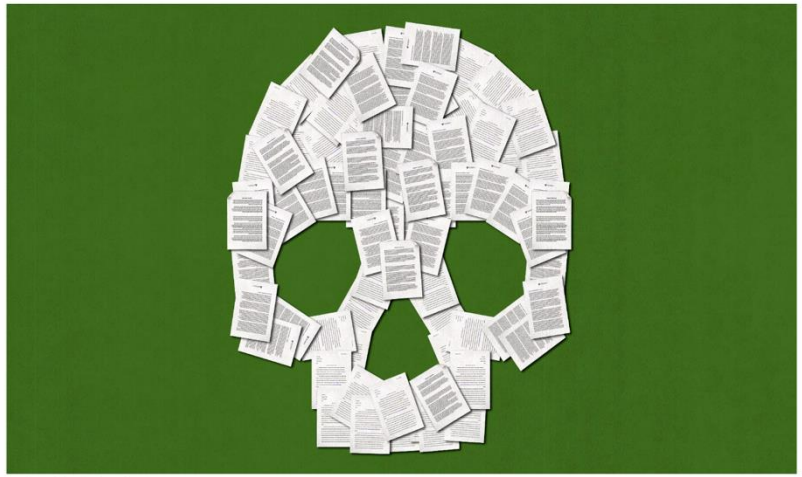
The College Essay Is Dead

Nobody is prepared for how AI will transform academia.

By Stephen Marche

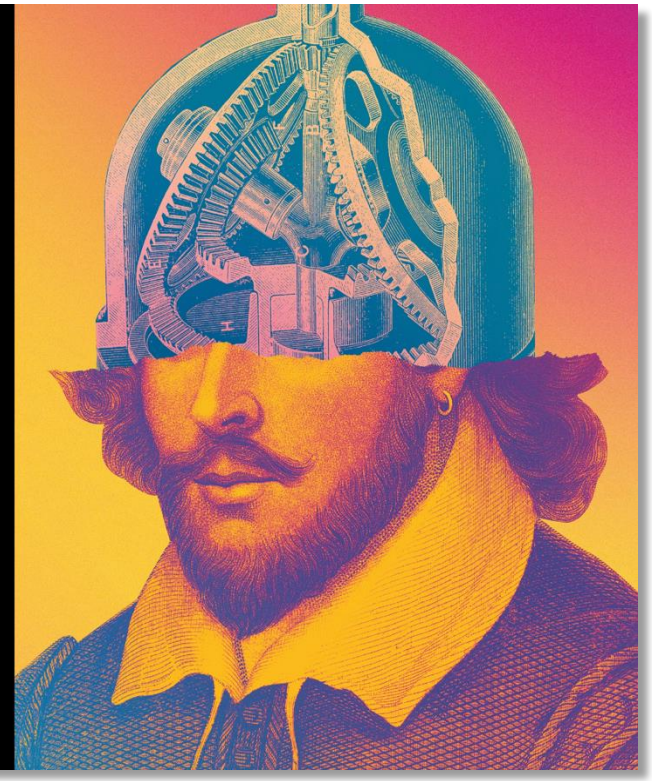


Paul Spella / The Atlantic; Getty

WORDS TO LIVE BY

AI and the End of the Human Writer

If a computer can write like a person, what does that say about the nature of our own creativity?



Literary Theory for LLMs

What LLMs, like OpenAI's GPT series of algorithm and Anthropic's Claude, signify is not the end of writing but the terminal limits of a particular conceptualization of writing that has been called *logocentrism*.

Agenda

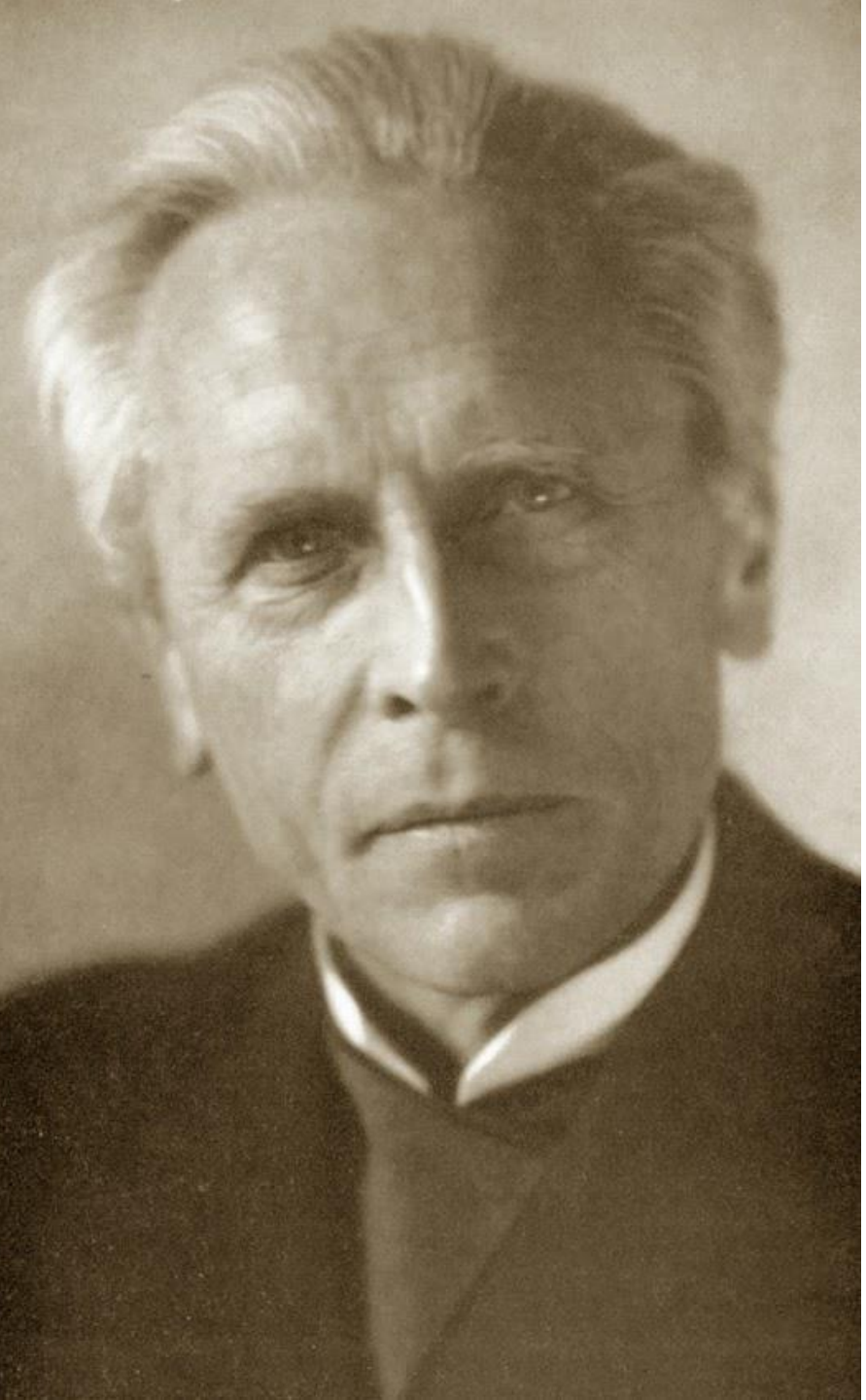
1. Logocentric Metaphysics
2. LLMs and the Deconstruction of Logocentrism
3. Outcomes and results

1

Logocentric Metaphysics

"ChatGPT lacks the ability to truly understand the complexity of human language and conversation. It is simply trained to generate words based on a given input, but it does not have the ability to truly comprehend the meaning behind those words."

“The models are built on statistics. They’re great at mimicry and bad at facts. Why? LLMs have no access to real-world, embodied referents”



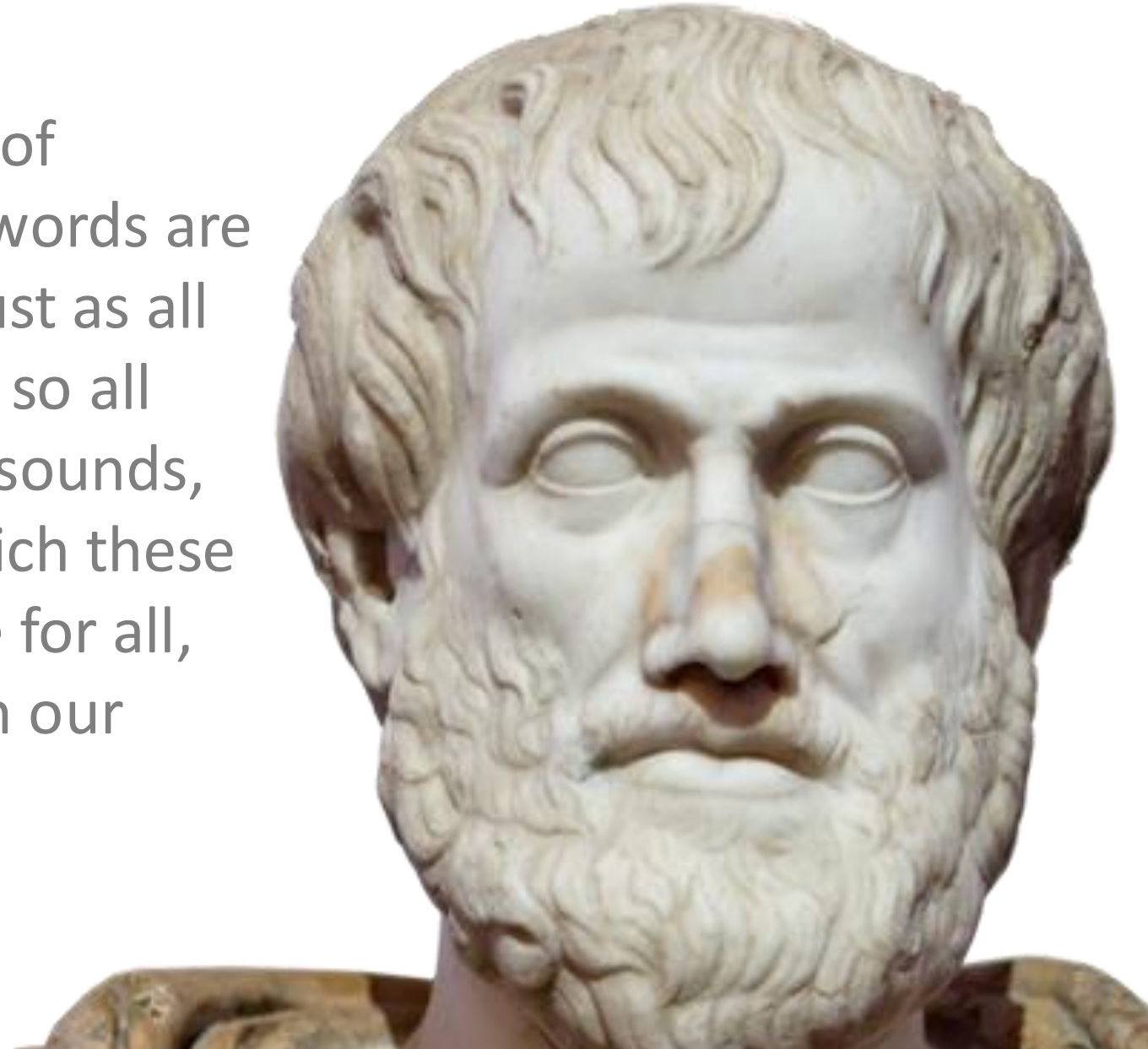
Logocentrism

A term coined by the German philosopher Ludwig Klages in the early 1900s. It refers to the tradition of Western science and philosophy that regards words and language as a fundamental expression of an external reality.

1. Words and Things

"Spoken words are the symbols of mental experience and written words are the symbols of spoken words. Just as all men have not the same writing, so all men have not the same speech sounds, but the mental experiences, which these directly symbolize, are the same for all, as also are those things of which our experiences are the images"

Aristotle. *De Interpretatione* 1.16a.3



things

thoughts

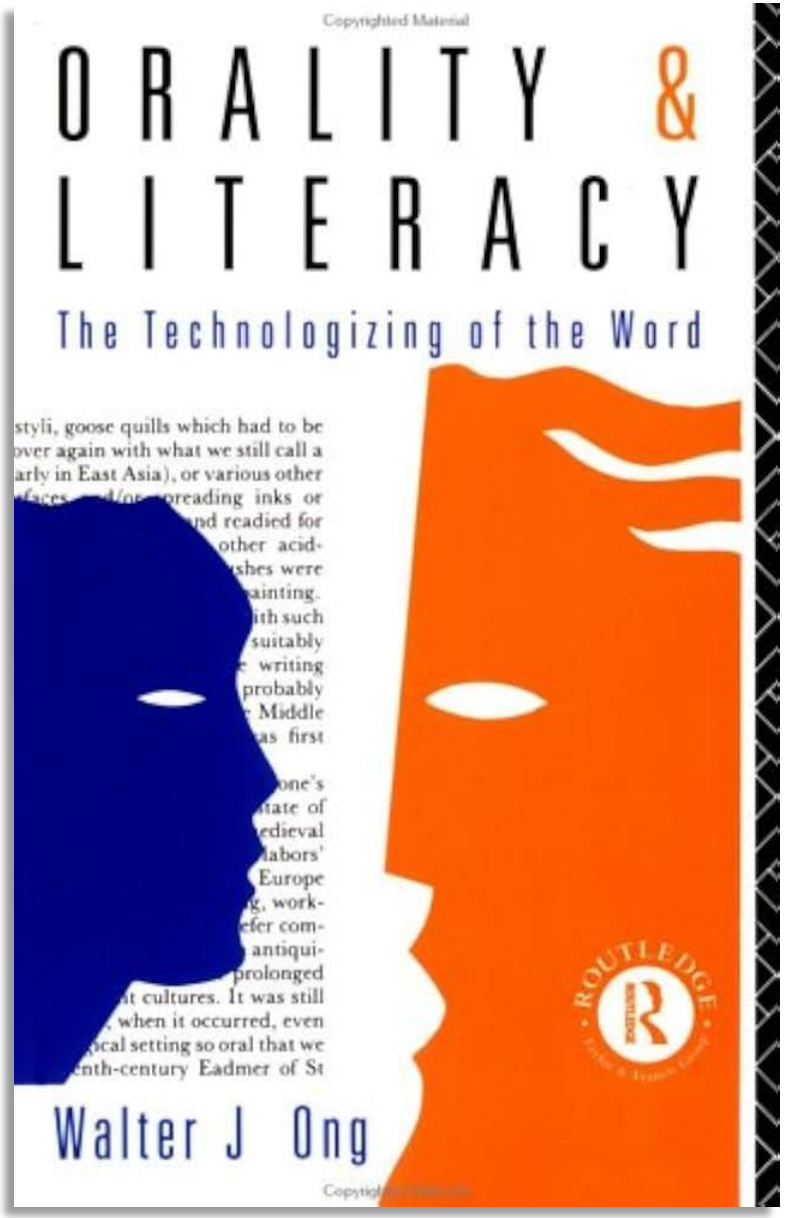
speech

writing

2. Writing is a Technology

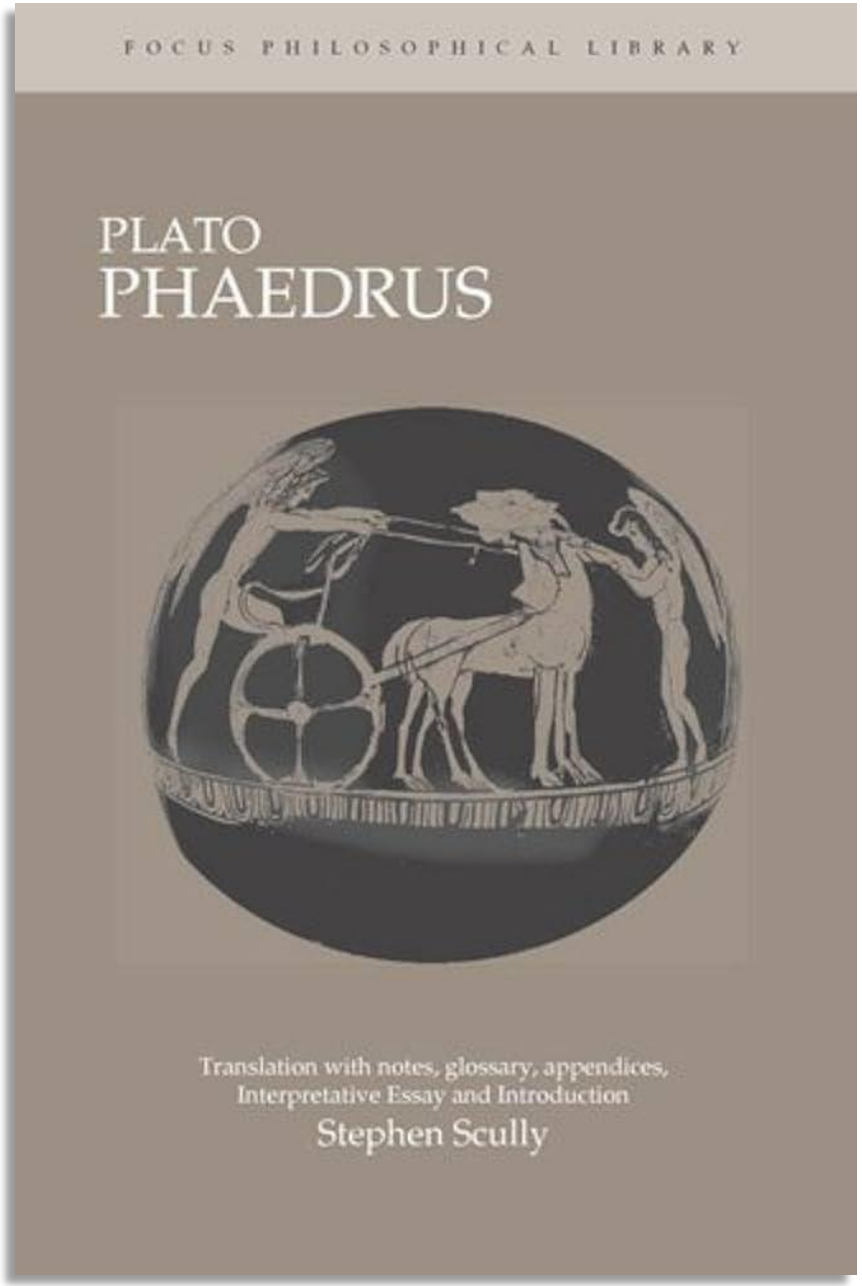
"Writing (and especially alphabetic writing) is a technology, calling for the use of tools and other equipment: styli or brushes or pens, carefully prepared surfaces, such as paper, animal skins, strips of wood, as well as inks and paints, and much more …By contrast with natural, oral speech, writing is completely artificial."

Walter Ong. *Orality & Literacy*, 1995.



“And so it is with written words; you might think they spoke as if they had intelligence, but if you question them, wishing to know about their sayings, they always say only one and the same thing.”

Plato. *Phaedrus*, 275d.



3. Writing is Expression

"If for Aristotle spoken words are the symbols of mental experience and written words are the symbols of spoken words, it is because the voice, producer of the first symbols, has a relationship of essential and immediate proximity with the mind. Producer of the first signifier, it is not just a simple signifier among others. It signifies 'mental experiences' which themselves reflect or mirror things by natural resemblance."

Jacques Derrida. *Of Grammatology*, 1967.

LLMs and the Deconstruction of Logocentrism

2

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Why ChatGPT doesn't understand what it's saying

GPT-3 is an artificial software system that predicts the next word. It does not need to get anything done with those predictions in the real world.

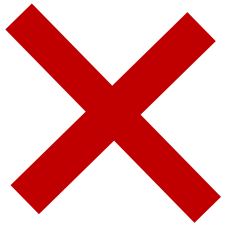
[Photo: ne2pi/Getty Images]

BY ARTHUR GLENBERG AND CAMERON ROBERT JONES—THE CONVERSATION

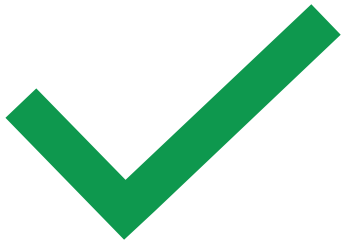
4 MINUTE READ

These algorithms might be able to arrange words in seemingly intelligible orders but they do not know what it is they are saying.

The Problem



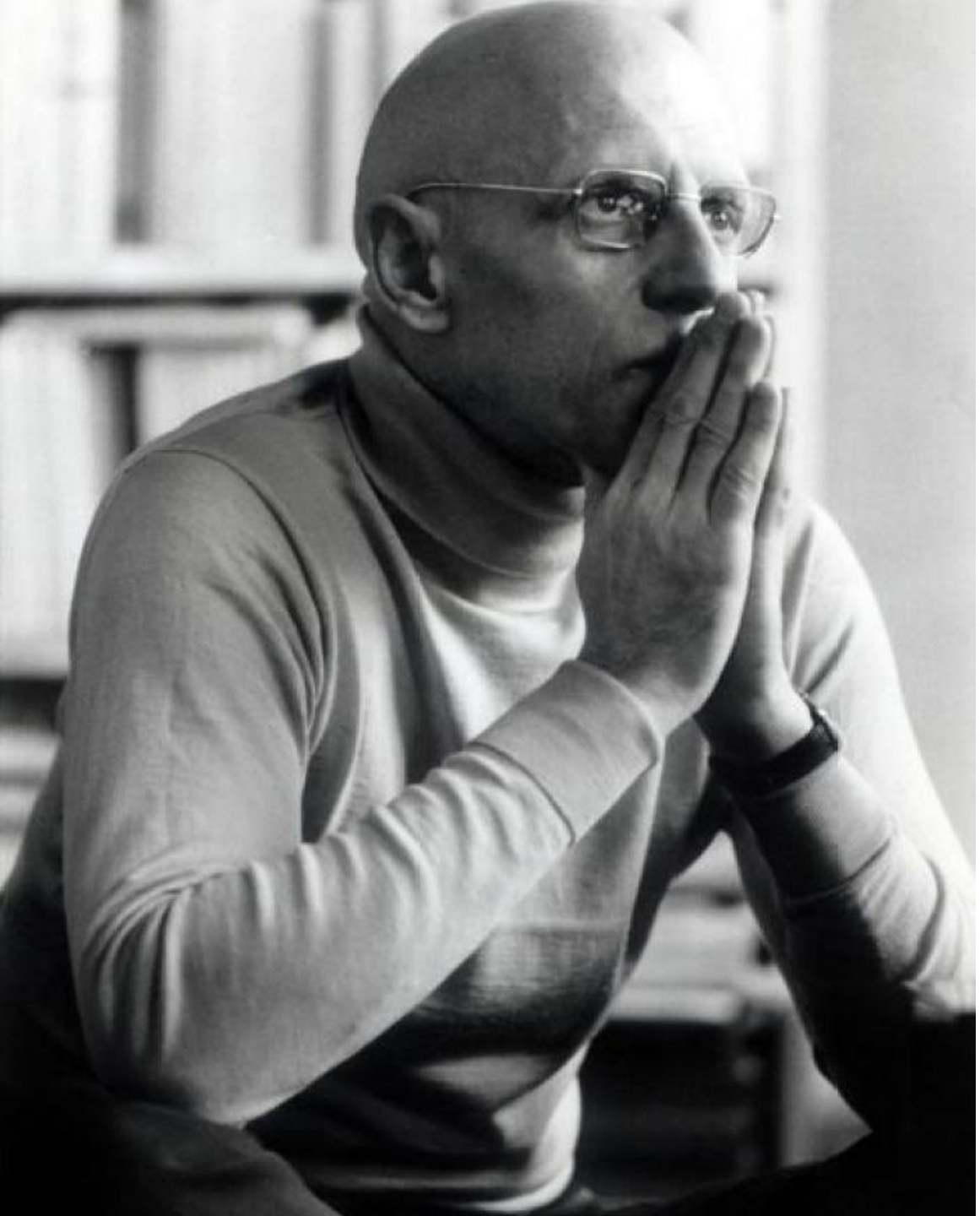
Not that logocentrism has somehow failed to work in the face of LLMs tech.



Logocentrism works all too well, exerting its influence over our thinking about writing and writing about thinking in ways that go by largely without notice.

1. Question Authority

Author



WHAT IS AN AUTHOR?

The coming into being of the notion of "author" constitutes the privileged moment of individualization in the history of ideas, knowledge, literature, philosophy, and the sciences. Even today, when we reconstruct the history of a concept, literary genre, or school of philosophy, such categories seem relatively weak, secondary, and superimposed scansions in comparison with the solid and fundamental unit of the author and the work.

I shall not offer here a sociohistorical analysis of the author's persona. Certainly, it would be worth examining how the author became individualized in a culture like ours, what status he has been given, at what moment studies of authenticity and attribution began, in what kind of system of valorization the author was involved, at what point we began to recount the lives of authors rather than of heroes, and how this fundamental category of "the-man-and-his-work criticism" began. For the moment, however, I want to deal solely with the relationship between text and author and with the manner in which the text points to this figure that, at least in appearance, is outside it and antecedes it.

Beckett nicely formulates the theme with which I would like to begin: " 'What does it matter who is speaking,' someone said, 'what does it matter who is speaking.' " In this indifference appears one of the fundamental ethical principles of contemporary writing [*écriture*]. I say "ethical" because this indifference is really not a trait characterizing the manner in which one speaks and writes but, rather, a kind of immanent rule, taken up over and over again, never fully applied, not designating writing as something completed, but dominating it as a practice. Since it is too familiar to require a lengthy analysis, this immanent rule can be adequately illustrated here by tracing two of its major themes.

First of all, we can say that today's writing has freed itself from the theme of

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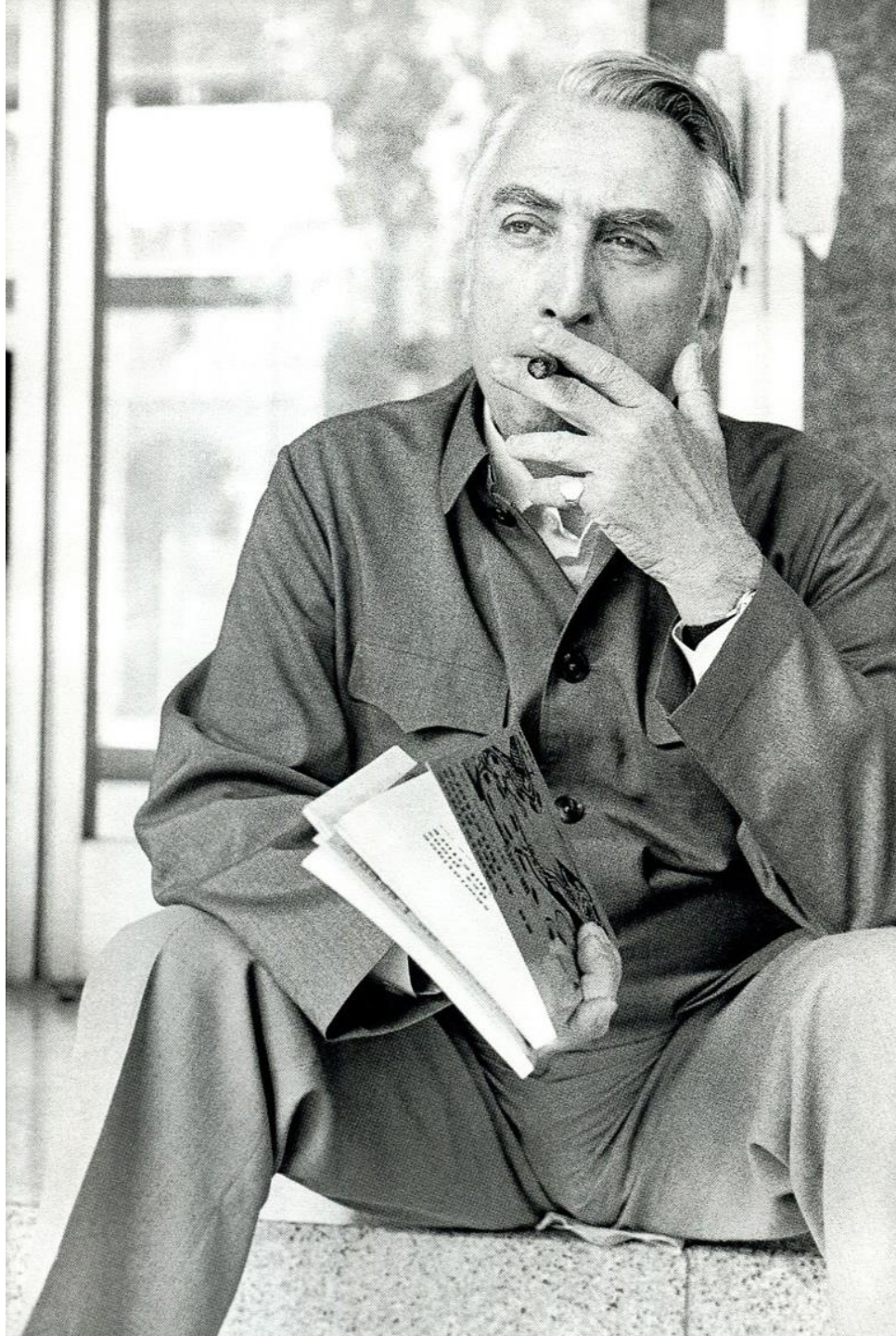
This essay is the text of a lecture presented to the Société Française de philosophie on 22 February 1969 (Foucault gave a modified form of the lecture in the United States in 1970). This translation, by Josué V. Harari, has been slightly modified.

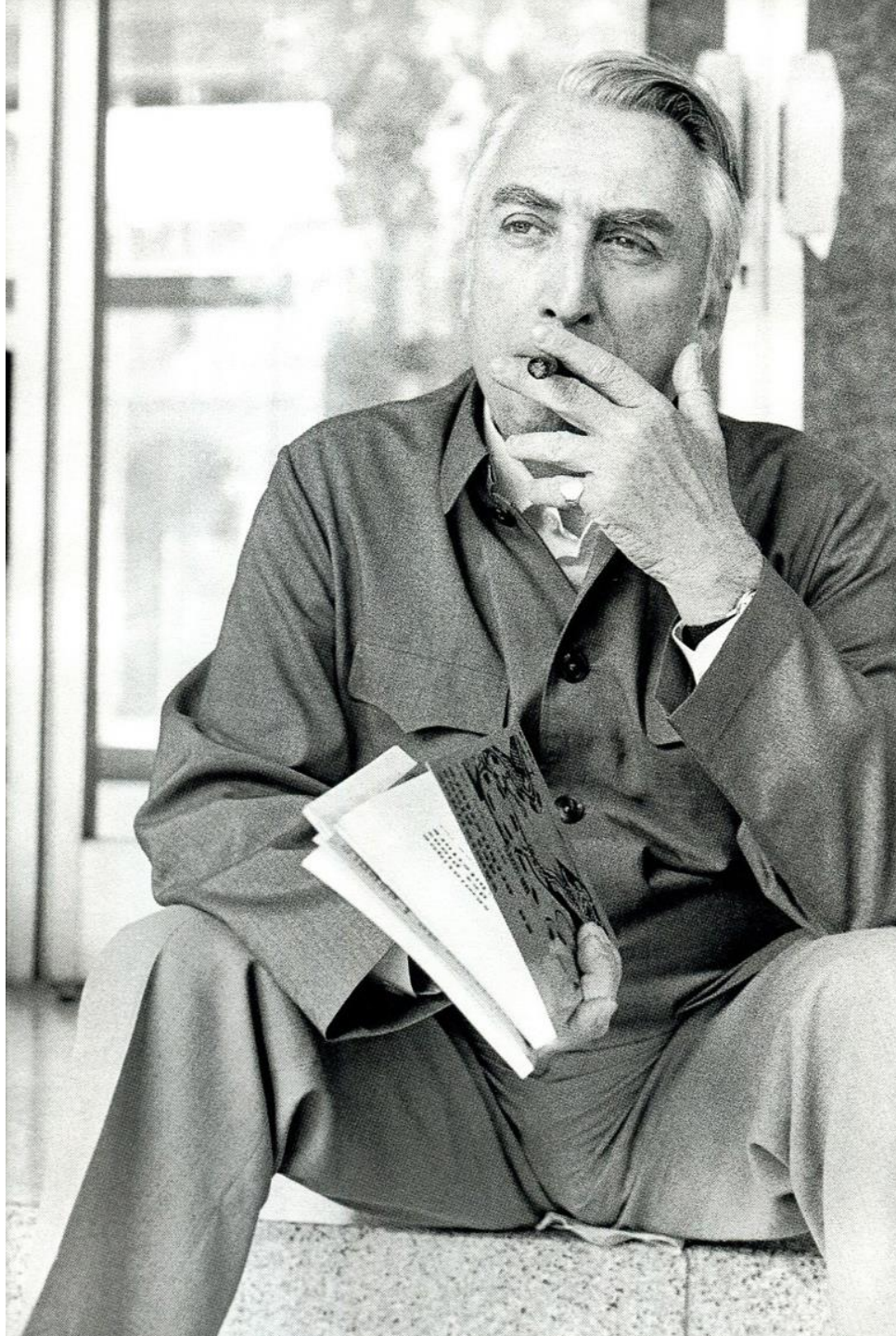
“The author is a modern figure, a product of our society in so far as, emerging from the Middle Ages with English empiricism, French rationalism and the personal faith of the Reformation, it discovered the prestige of the individual, of, as it is more nobly put, the ‘human person.’”

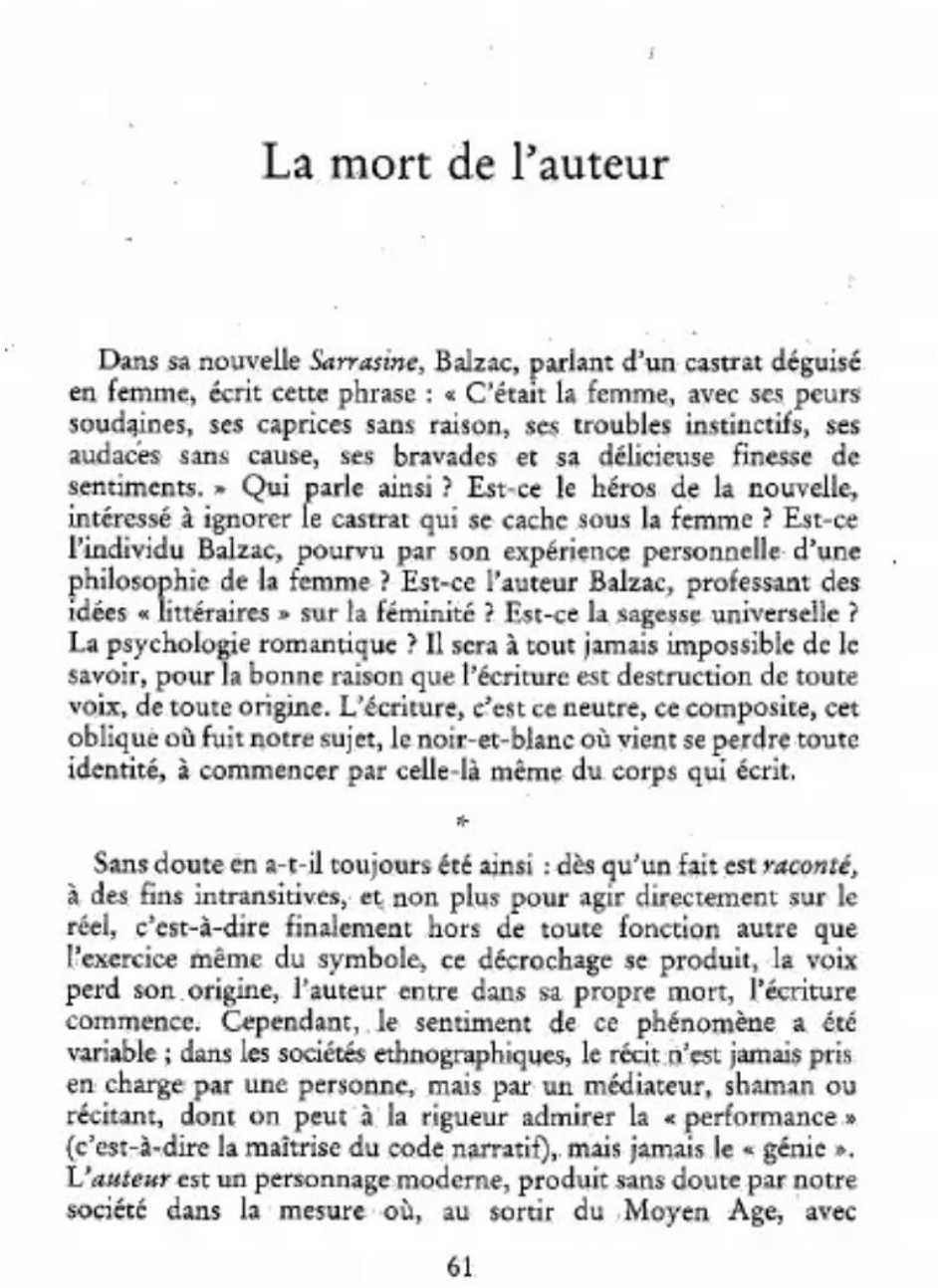
Roland Barthes. ”Death of the Author,” 1978.



“In ethnographic societies the responsibility for a narrative is never assumed by a person but by a mediator, shaman, or relator whose ’performance’—the mastery of the narrative code—may possibly be admired but never his ‘genius.’”

Roland Barthes. ”Death of the Author,” 1978.





La mort de l'auteur

Dans sa nouvelle *Sarrasine*, Balzac, parlant d'un castrat déguisé en femme, écrit cette phrase : « C'était la femme, avec ses peurs soudaines, ses caprices sans raison, ses troubles instinctifs, ses audaces sans cause, ses bravades et sa délicieuse finesse de sentiments. » Qui parle ainsi ? Est-ce le héros de la nouvelle, intéressé à ignorer le castrat qui se cache sous la femme ? Est-ce l'individu Balzac, pourvu par son expérience personnelle d'une philosophie de la femme ? Est-ce l'auteur Balzac, professant des idées « littéraires » sur la féminité ? Est-ce la sagesse universelle ? La psychologie romantique ? Il sera à tout jamais impossible de le savoir, pour la bonne raison que l'écriture est destruction de toute voix, de toute origine. L'écriture, c'est ce neutre, ce composite, cet oblique où fuit notre sujet, le noir-et-blanc où vient se perdre toute identité, à commencer par celle-là même du corps qui écrit.

*

Sans doute en a-t-il toujours été ainsi : dès qu'un fait est *raconté*, à des fins intransitives, et non plus pour agir directement sur le réel, c'est-à-dire finalement hors de toute fonction autre que l'exercice même du symbole, ce décrochage se produit, la voix perd son origine, l'auteur entre dans sa propre mort, l'écriture commence. Cependant, le sentiment de ce phénomène a été variable ; dans les sociétés ethnographiques, le récit n'est jamais pris en charge par une personne, mais par un médiateur, shaman ou récitant, dont on peut à la rigueur admirer la « performance » (c'est-à-dire la maîtrise du code narratif), mais jamais le « génie ». L'*auteur* est un personnage moderne, produit sans doute par notre société dans la mesure où, au sortir du Moyen Age, avec

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"Death of the Author"

What this phrase indicates is not the end-of-life of any particular individual or the end of human writing but the termination and closure of the figure of the author as the authorizing agent and guarantee of what is said in and by writing.

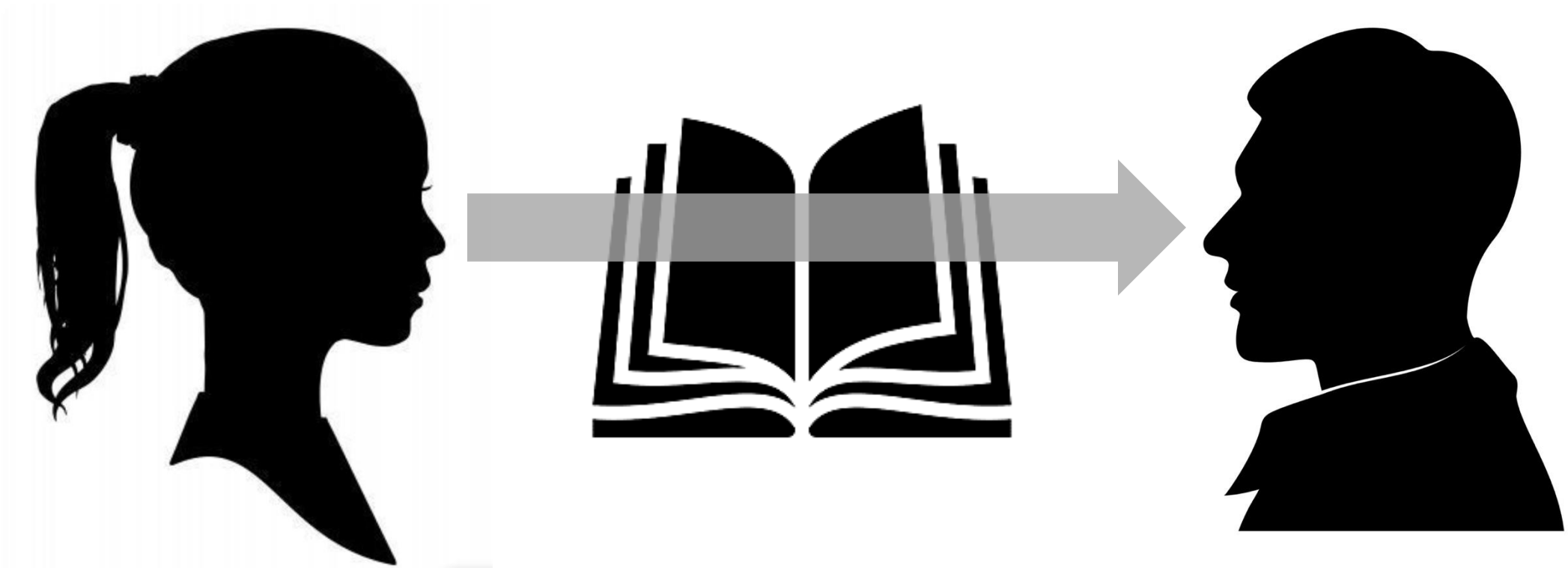
We now have writings without the underlying intentions of some living voice to animate and answer for what comes to be written. Such writings are, quite literally, *unauthorized.*

The concept of "the death of the author" does not refer to the literal demise of authors but rather to a theoretical idea put forth by the French literary critic and philosopher Roland Barthes in his essay "The Death of the Author," published in 1967. Barthes argued that once a literary work is created and made available to the readers, the author's intentions and interpretations should no longer be considered as the sole or primary meaning of the work.

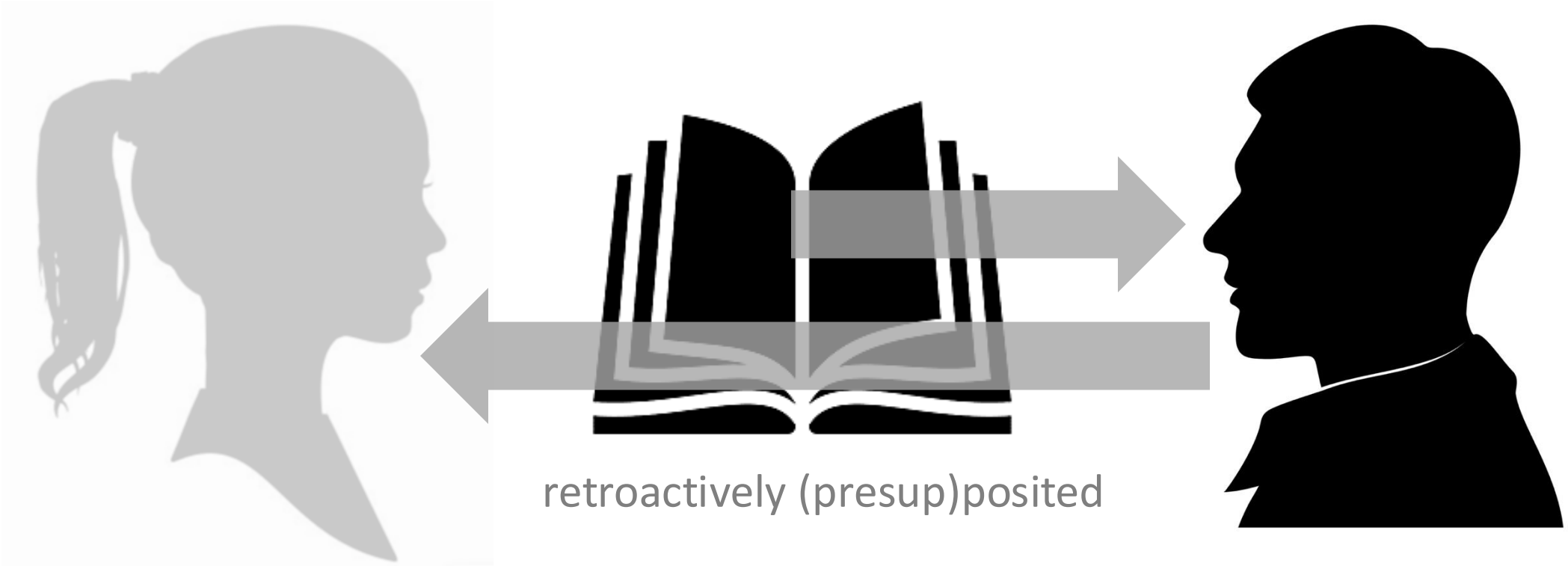
According to Barthes, the reader becomes an active participant in the creation of meaning, and their individual experiences, beliefs, and cultural background influence how they interpret the text. As such, the author's identity and intentions become less important in the reader's engagement with the work.

In relation to large language models like ChatGPT, it could be argued that they further challenge the traditional role of the author. These AI models can generate text based on patterns in the data they were trained on, and they can mimic different writing styles, voices, and tones. This means that the "voice" behind the generated text may not belong to a single human author but is a product of the amalgamation of diverse sources and influences.

2. The Means of Meaning



2. The Means of Meaning



retroactively (presup)posited

“Text is made of multiple writings, drawn from many cultures and entering into mutual relations of dialogue, parody, contestation, but there is one place where this multiplicity is focused and that place is the reader…A text’s unity lies not in its origin but in its destination.”

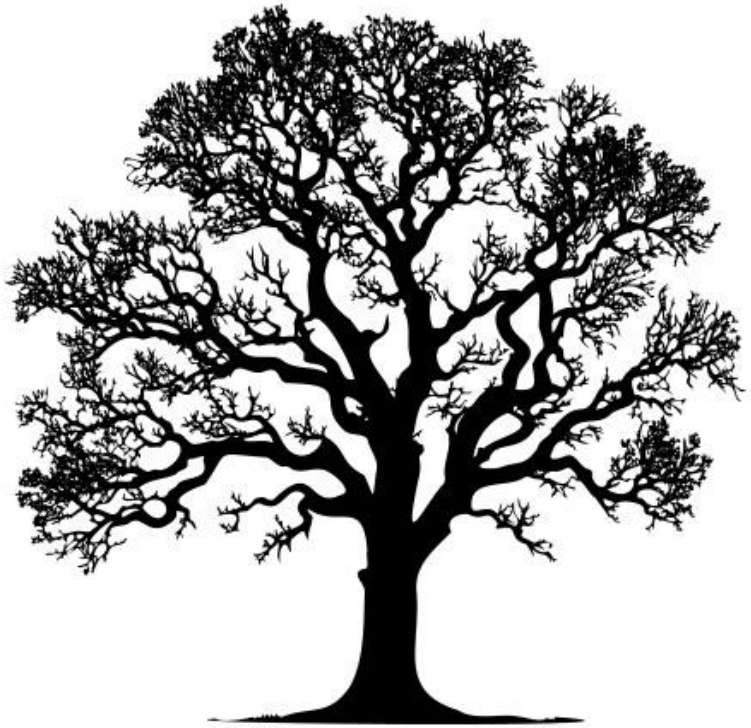
Roland Barthes. ”Death of the Author,” 1978.

“ChatGPT lacks the ability to truly understand the complexity of human language and conversation. It is simply trained to generate words based on a given input, but it does not have the ability to truly comprehend the meaning behind those words.”

Ian Bogost. “ChatGPT is Dumber Than You Think,” 2023.

3. Words and Things

tree



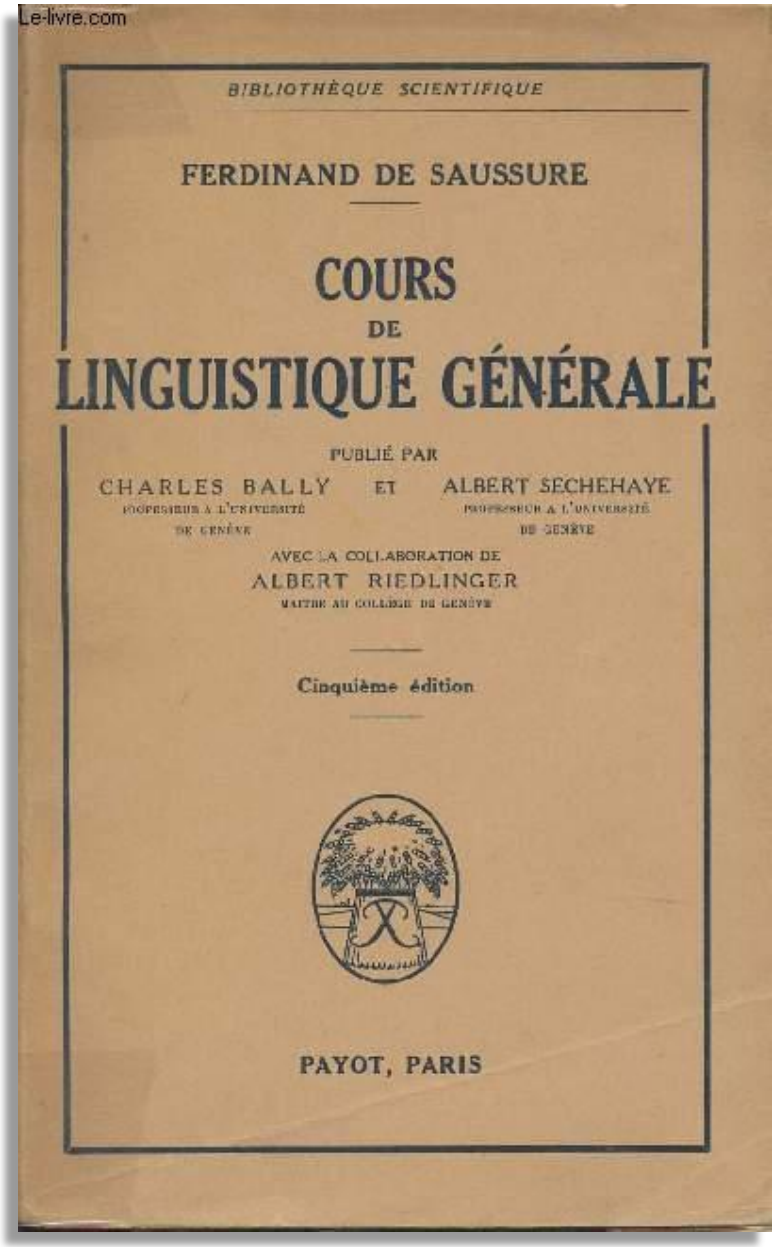
sign

signified

Large Language Model

“The signification *sign*, has always been understood and determined, in its meaning, as sign-of, a signifier referring to a signified, a signifier different from its signified”

Jacques Derrida. *Writing and Difference*. 1978.



Structural Linguistics

"In language there are only differences. Even more important: a difference generally implies positive terms between which the difference is set up; but in language there are only differences without positive terms."

Ferdinand de Saussure. *Course in General Linguistics*, 1959.

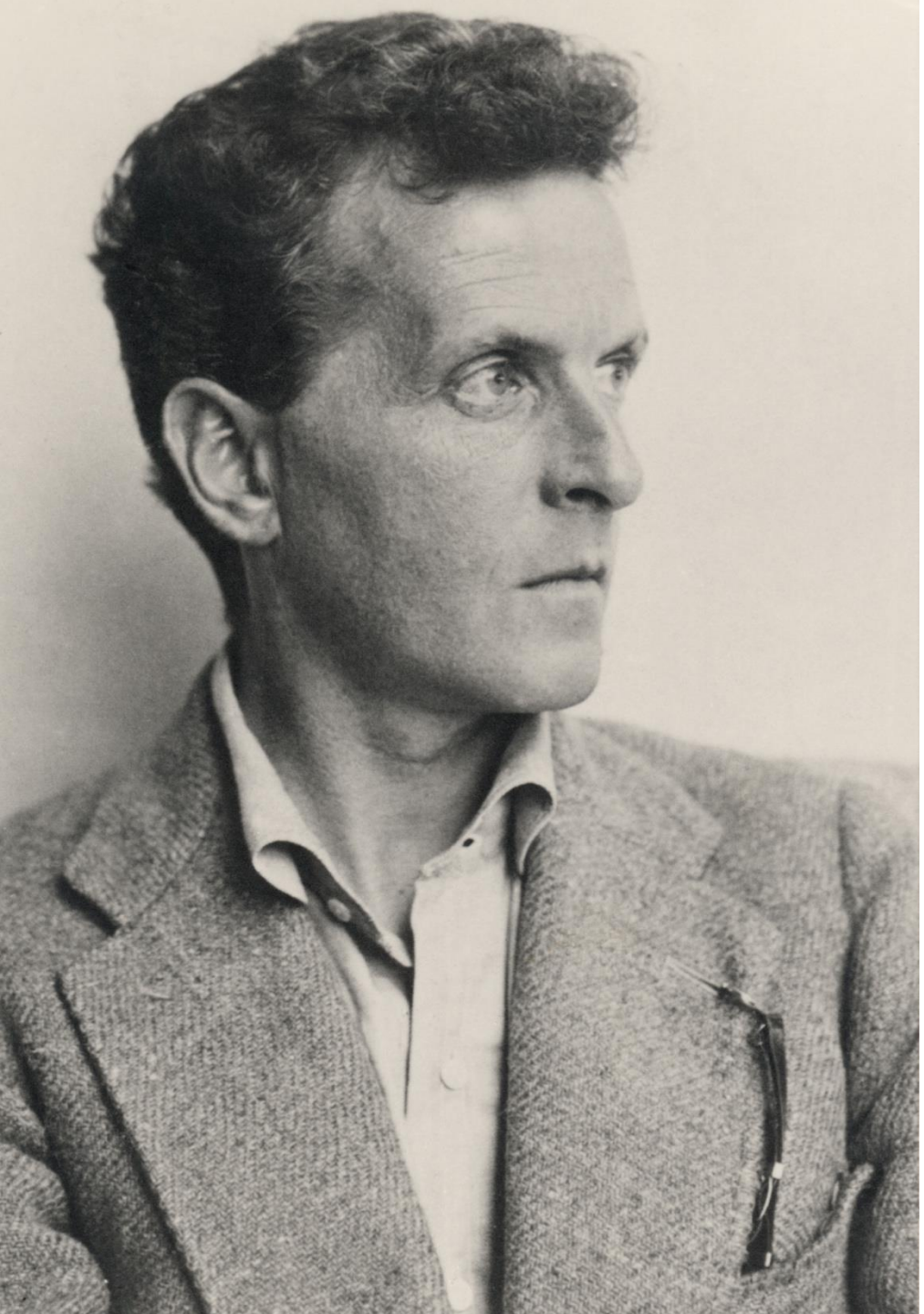
guag
—see also
def·i·nite·ly /ˈdefɪnʒ... /adv with no
being wrong; certainly: *Max knew that he ha*
been wrong about Diana. \ "*It's not worth that*
"*No, definitely not!*" —see OF COURSE (USA
(USAGE)

def·i·ni·tion /ˌdefɪ̥ˈnɪʃən/ *n* **1** [C] a phra
that says exactly what a word, phrase, or
definition in a dictionary \ [+ **of**] No one
with a satisfactory definition of terroris
nition if something has a particular
nition, it must have that quality becaus
type have it: *A message that cannot be*
definition, not effective. **3** [U] the de
thing such as a picture, sound etc
nition *The photograph lacks defini*

de·fin·i·tive /dɪˈfɪnɪ̥tɪv/ *adj* **1** [
finitive book, study of somethi
ever produced and ca
finitive book o

Il n'y a pas de hors-texte

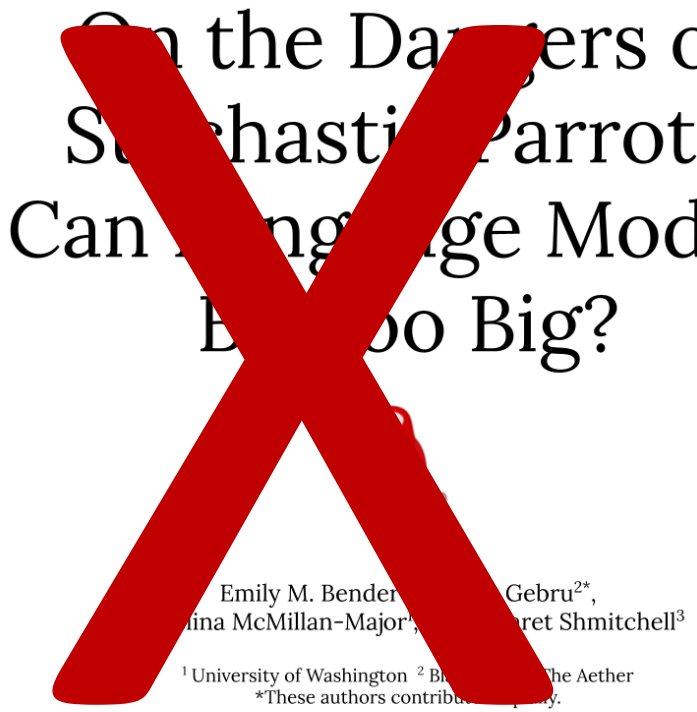
There is nothing outside the text



Generative AI

"The limits of their language model mean the limits of their world."

Ludwig Wittgenstein. *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, 1922.

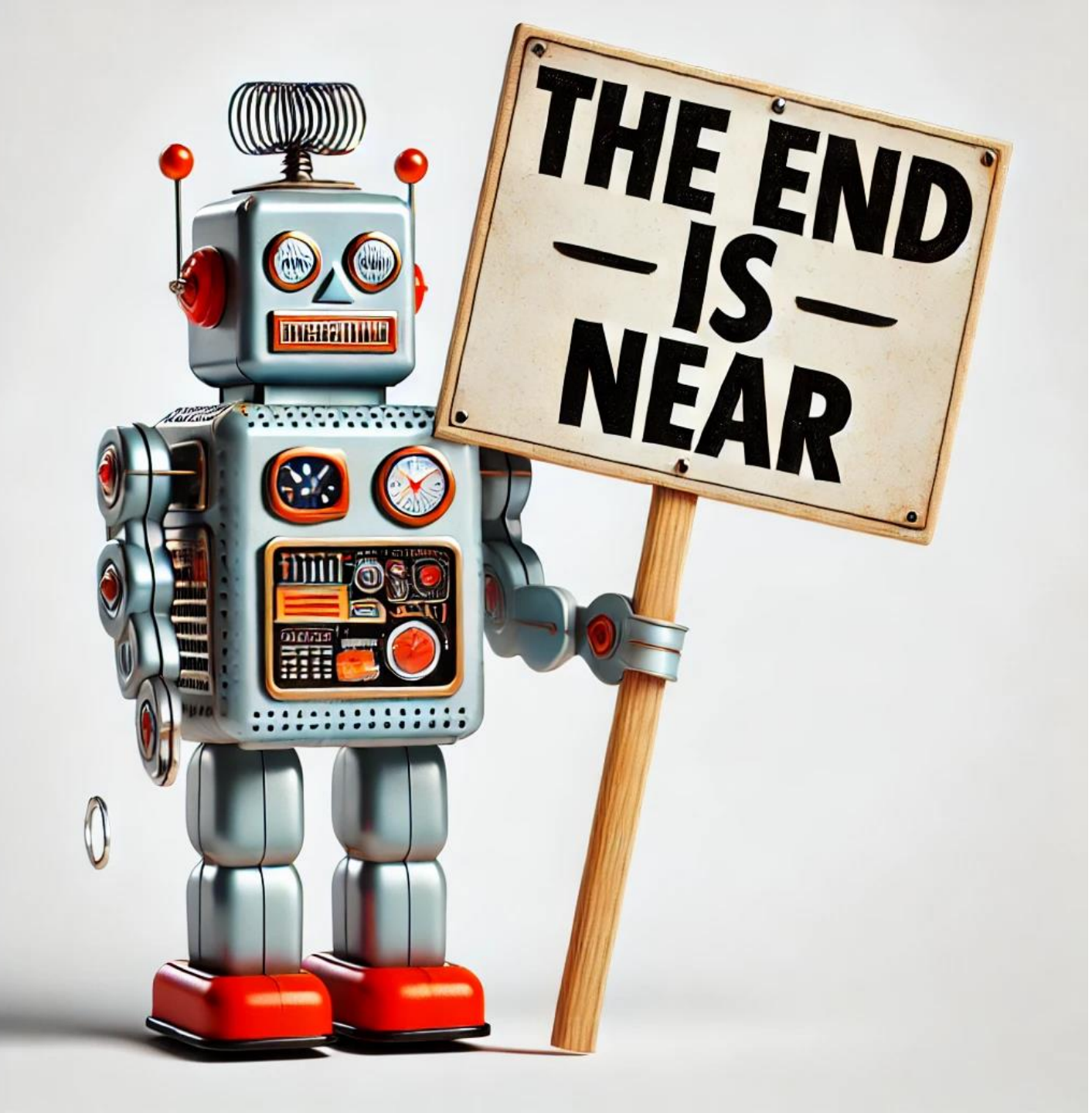


LLMs are structuralist machines that deconstruct the defining conceptual opposition of classical semiotics.

Outcomes and Results

3

What we now have with LLMs are things that write without speaking, a proliferation of texts that do not have nor are beholden to the authoritative voice of an author, and statements the truth of which cannot be anchored in and assured by a prior intention to say something.

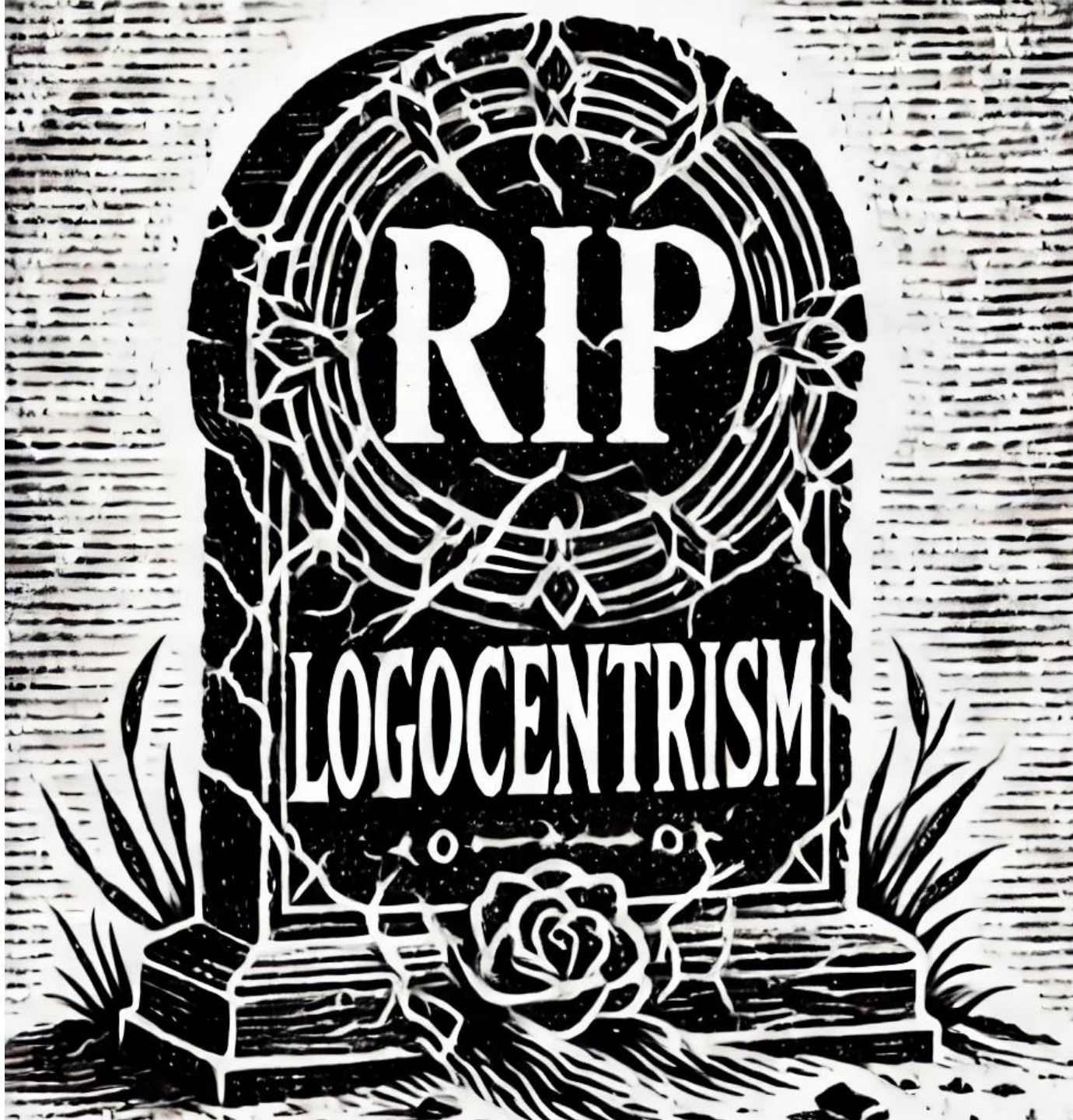


What is on the line and in the crosshairs is our very understanding of language and the meaning of literature.

The future of writing and human communication appear to be in jeopardy

THE END
— IS —
NEAR

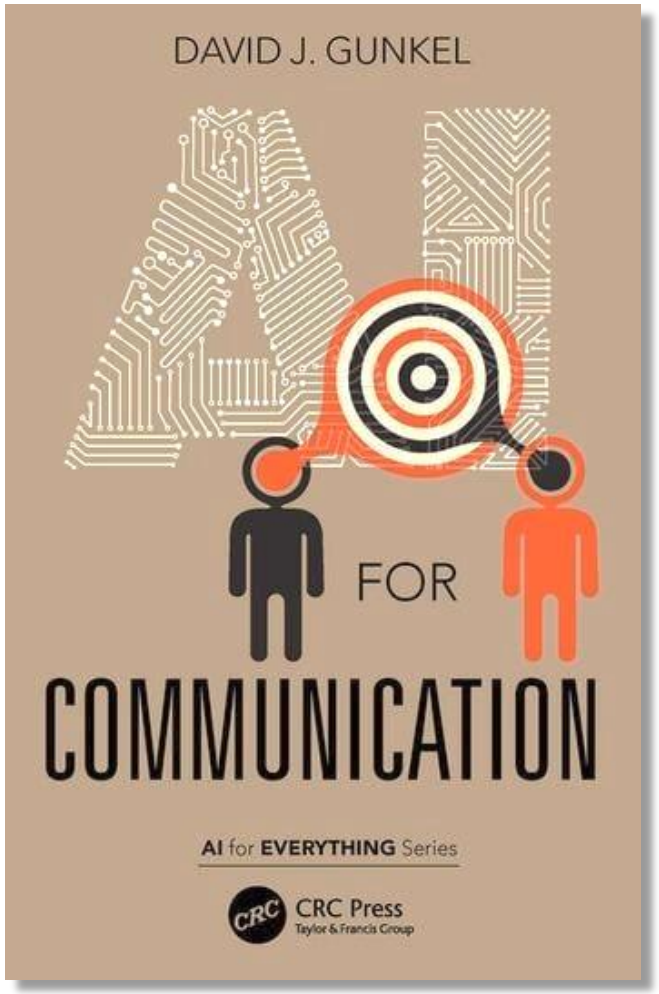
Large Language Models and generative AI reveal the limits of the logocentric privilege, participate in a deconstruction of its organizing principles, and open the opportunity to think and write differently.

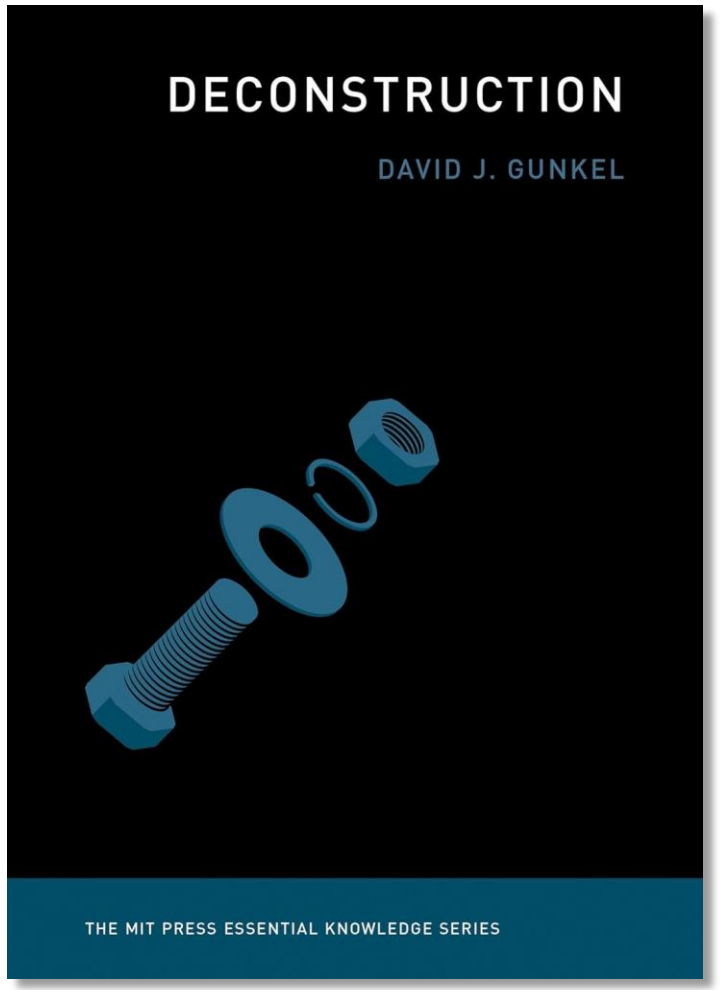


Writing

Does writing have a future?

The process of arranging of words or linguistic tokens in a linear sequence on some tangible medium.





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