



Readerly and Writerly Texts

Translated from Barthes' neologisms *lisible* and *scriptible*, the terms readerly and writerly text mark the distinction between traditional literary works such as the classical novel, and those twentieth century works, like the [new novel](#), which violate the conventions of [realism](#) and thus force the reader to produce a meaning or meanings which are inevitably other than final or "authorized." Barthes writes:

The writerly text is a perpetual present, upon which no *consequent* language (which would inevitably make it past) can be superimposed; the writerly text is *ourselves writing*, before the infinite play of the world (the world as function) is traversed, intersected, stopped, plasticized by some singular system (Ideology, Genus, Criticism) which reduces the plurality of entrances, the opening of networks, the infinity of languages. (*S/Z* 5)

Readerly texts, by contrast, are anything but readerly; they are manifestations of [The Book](#). They do not locate the reader as a site of the production of meaning, but only as the receiver of a fixed, pre-determined, reading. They are thus products rather than productions and thus form the dominant mode of literature under capital.

Behind these distinctions lies Barthes' own aesthetic and political projects, the championing of those texts which he sees as usefully challenging--often through the method of self-reflexivity--traditional literary conventions such as the omniscient narrator. For Barthes, the readerly text, like the commodity, disguises its status as a fiction, as a literary product, and presents itself as a transparent window onto "reality." The writerly text, however, self-consciously acknowledges its artifice by calling attention to the various rhetorical techniques which produce the illusion of realism. In accord with his proclamation of [The Death of the Author](#), Barthes insists, "the goal of literary work (of literature as work) is to make the reader no longer a consumer, but a producer of the text" (*S/Z* 4).

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