“Words With an Alien Voice”
Gnostics, Scripture, and Canon
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The title of this article comes from the following passage by Edmond Jabès in The Book of Questions: “You, who think I exist, how can I tell you what I know with words which mean more than one thing, with words like me, which change when looked at, words with an alien voice?” (1972:40). Jabès’ work can be read as a long meditation on the refusal of words to stay put in the neat canonical—Scriptural—niches to which we assign them. Any text, and any canon defined as a collection of texts, is self-transgressive by virtue of the nature of words themselves: as Jabès remarks, “How can I say what I know with words whose signification is multiple?” (1959:41). If “every word unveils another tie” (Jabès 1972:37), which requires further words for expression, then the concept of canon as a fixed authority, that is, as a fixed corpus of texts, is mistaken, even delusory.

It is with such a perspective on the nature of writing in relation to a Scriptural canon that this essay explores Gnostic hermeneutics. The focus of attention is not on Gnostic interpretation of isolated passages of Scripture, but rather on Gnostic theories about the qualities of language that contributed to Gnostic use of Scripture and understandings of canon. “Gnostic” here designates the Valentinian tradition as represented by the Gospel of Truth and the Tripartite Tractate,¹ although the conclusions which this essay will present may have implications for Gnosticism more broadly conceived.

“You try to be free through writing. How wrong. Every word

¹The Valentinian provenance of the Tripartite Tractate is discussed by Attridge and Pagels (1985a:177-90). Concerning the probable authorship of the Gospel of Truth by Valentinus himself, I accept the positive conclusions reached by Standaert (1976a:259-65) and, most recently, by Williams (2-5:205-7). Authorship by Valentinus would place the writing of the Gospel of Truth in the mid-2nd century C.E.
unveils another tie" (Jabès 1972:37). Jabès seems to suggest that there is something about writing—indeed, about language—that is inherently contradictory, both freeing and alienating. This conundrum at the heart of language was troublesome also to the author of the *Tripartite Tractate.*

This text frequently associates the unfathomable origin of all that is with language. On the one hand, "innumerable and invisible are the begettings of his words" (67.24-25). This unfathomable one is the fount of language; appropriately, then, "It is possible to speak of him because of the wealth of speech" (73.13-14). Seemingly, the wealth of language, with its innumerable words, gives the freedom to speak; speech is freed when there is an abundance of words. However, the same text also says of the unfathomable one that "in silence he himself holds back" (55.37).3 "Not one of the names which are conceived, or spoken, seen or grasped, not one of them applies to him..." (54.2-6). No language can convey him (54.16-17): it would seem that the other side of linguistic plenitude is silence and inadequacy. Words speak with an alien voice.

The *Tripartite Tractate* has intensified the conundrum: how is it possible that the unfathomable one can be both spoken and not spoken? This text does not "solve" the conundrum by siding either with language or with silence; instead, it shifts the ground of the discussion by focusing on language as a quest that both conceals and reveals meaning. The unfathomable one "did not wish that they should know him, since he grants that he be conceived in such a way as to be sought for, while keeping to himself his unsearchable being" (71.14-19). The accent here is on the search, for to speak is to search, and that is how the ineffable "origin" can be conceived. What language as search yields, however, is neither the presence nor the absence of the unfathomable one, but rather "traces" of him. All words are traces which mark out the paths of the search (65.39-66.5).4

In order to explicate the idea of word as trace—which is really another way of indicating the liberating-and-alienating character of lan-

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2I have used the translation of the *Tripartite Tractate* by Attridge and Pagels (1985a:193-337).
3Attridge and Pagels remark about "silence" that "apparently to protect the absolute transcendence of the Father, he [the author of the *Tripartite Tractate*] interprets the silence as a quality of the Father's solitary existence" (1985b:234). My understanding of silence differs from theirs, in that my focus is on the relation of the unnameable one with language (which the text underscores often). In this context, silence functions not as an indicator of metaphysical status (transcendence) but as a dynamic of language.
4This use of the Greek word *skhos* , "trace," is closely paralleled by Plotinus' understanding of the term, precisely in the context of theological language. See Cox (179-80).
guage—I would like to move briefly to contemporary discussions of the
dynamics of the production of meaning in and by texts. In such discus-
sions, what is fundamental to the operations of language has repeatedly
been characterized by two concepts: polyvalence and dissemination.
Polyvalence refers to the semantic richness of words—to the play of
allusion, cross-reference, echo, multiple signification that is unleashed
by language. In the *Tripartite Tractate*, the gift of the unnameable one is
language: “in order that they might know [what exists] for them, he
graciously [granted the] initial form . . . he gave them the name ‘Father’
by means of a voice proclaiming to them that what exists exists through
that name . . .” (61.9-17). As what allows the production of meaning,
the unnameable one says nothing; rather, he permits saying. “Father”
signifies the first linguistic gesture, which is polyvalent, even overdeter-
determined; in it are what the text calls “aeons,” which are described as
“seeds” and “fetuses” which “Father” begets “like the word” (60.1-35).
These fledgling words, ready to sprout and take form like seeds and
fetuses, have “the sole task of searching for him . . . ever wishing to find
out what exists” (61.24-28). Characterized as having “a love and a
longing for the perfect, complete discovery of the Father” (71.8-9), the
aeons taken collectively are representative of the dynamic of desire in
language, the desire to name the unnameable that the polyvalence of
words animates.

From the perspective of polyvalence, words are overdetermined, able
to operate on several registers of meaning at once. Understandings of
the operations of language in terms of polyvalence tend to attribute to
language the capability of articulating meaning in all of its fullness:
such richness can be present—or so it would appear. However, any
single articulation of language—any particular word or text—can only
express a fragment of the potential whole. As Italo Calvino has
observed, words are “a perpetual pursuit of things, a perpetual adjust-
ment to their infinite variety” (1988:26). In other words, the richness of
language is an *embarras de richesse*: meaning is disseminated, dis-
persed, in the very attempt to say it, so that to write is to be in perpetual
pursuit of the meaningfulness of things. From the perspective of dis-
semination, to write is not to find but to search. The *Tripartite Tractate*

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3 The literature is, of course, immense. I have been most influenced in my own thinking about
these issues by Derrida (1981), especially sections I and II (“Plato’s Pharmacy”), and by Derrida
(1978), especially Ch. 10, “Structure, Sign, and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences”; by
Barthes (1975); Kristeva (1986); de Certeau (1986), especially Ch. 4, “Lacan: An Ethics of
Speech,” and Ch. 6, “Mystic Speech.”

4 On dissemination, see especially Derrida (1981).
is insistent on this point: “Father” grants that he be conceived of in such a way as to be sought for (71.14-19). What is “found” is not some “content,” a final naming of the unnameable, since what the aeons know is precisely that what stands behind “Father” as linguistic gesture is unknowable (73.1). Hence the “goal” is the search itself, conducted in language, as the aeons—words born of the “first” word—“bear fruit with one another” (69.19-20). Words begetting other words, the aeons embody the “places” that mark the path of the dissemination of meaning (71.19-21).

If, from the perspective of dissemination, to write is not to find but to search, it is also characteristic of this dynamic of language that words are entangled in the movement of a “perpetual adjustment to infinite variety.” Words are not identical to the things that they name; in thus differing from their referents, words defer meaning. To write is to participate in an infinite deferral of meaning, since each new attempt to articulate meaning repeats the “original” substitution of word for thing. That which allows for the very production of meaning is unnameable and unknowable: it is absent; from this perspective, when one looks at language, one sees defect and loss. If words disseminate meaning, the problematic of writing is “how to express what expression abolishes.”

“All letters give form to absence” (Jabès 1972:47). In an essay on Jabès’ work, Jacques Derrida comments on this remark: “Absence is the permission given to letters to spell themselves out and to signify, but it is also, in language’s twisting of itself, what letters say: they say freedom and a granted emptiness, that which is formed by being enclosed in letters’ net” (1978:72). The Tripartite Tractate dramatizes the disseminative dynamic of language in its narrative about logos, one of the aeons. As one of the aeons, logos, “word,” personifies and so brings to attention the disseminative plight of all the aeon-words that dwell in the depths of language. Like all the aeons, logos was “in the Father’s thought, that is, in the hidden depth, the depth knew them, but they were unable to know the depth in which they were; nor was it possible for them to know themselves, nor for them to know any thing else” (60.16-26).

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7 At 70.10, the aeons are called “words of words.”
8 On the deferral of meaning in language, see especially Barthes (1979) and Derrida (1978), Ch. 7, “Freud and the Scene of Writing.”
9 The phrase is from Fineman (299). The whole passage deserves to be quoted: “... we can specify the problem in very precise terms: how conduct a discourse about the origin of discourse when the origin is structured by the discourse such that it is excluded from it and unspeakable within it—and this precisely because the discourse is conceived and thematized as discourse: how to express what expression abolishes” (298-99).
Unaware of themselves in the hidden depths of language, the plight of words is their relation to knowledge: how and what do words mean? The drama of *logos* is a drama of the reconciliation of language to its own dissemination, to its entanglement with freedom and emptiness.

The story of *logos* opens with the following recognition: "there is a limit set to speech in the pleroma, so that they are silent about the incomprehensibility of the Father..." (75.13-15). In the pleroma, the fullness or polyvalence of language, there is a limiting factor, namely, a silence about incomprehensibility. How can words express what expression abolishes? Not knowing this—that is, not knowing the disseminative function of language—*logos* "attempts to grasp the incomprehensibility" (75.18-19). As the text says, this attempt was founded in desire, and its intent was good (76.1-4): from the perspective of polyvalence, language longs to express meaning in its fullness. From this act of grasping, that is, from the attempt to use language to fix and so limit the disseminative slide of meaning, comes the drama of *logos*: the "Father and the Totalities drew away from him, so that the limit which the Father had set might be established" (76.30-34).

*Logos*, now cut off from appropriate uses of language, begins nonetheless to create, "but those whom he wished to take hold of firmly he begot in shadows [and] copies and likenesses" (77.15-17). "His self-exaltation and his expectation of comprehending the incomprehensible became firm for him and was in him" (77.25-28). When there is no recognition that "all letters give form to absence," words lose their freedom to signify and become mere shadows and copies. What *logos* created was literalism, a fixing of words to things such that they signify content rather than the search for meaning. This move is labeled "arrogant" and "deficient" (78.14; 78.30), and the text goes on to show how the creations of this mistaken act on the part of *logos* are characterized by ambition, desire for control, lust for power, and so on: such are what the desire for fixation unleashes (79.12-32).

What *logos* did not realize, in its refusal of dissemination, was that the infinite deferral of meaning in and by language entails an endless narrativity. Tragically, it was precisely *logos*’ attempt to end the story, an attempt born of the desire to tell the whole story, that produced "little weaklings" which were "hindered by the illnesses by which he too was hindered" (81.1-3). Furthermore, *logos* separated itself from the very reality that it was trying to express: Father and Totalities withdrew, and *logos* saw only division (77.21). What *logos* did not know has been well expressed as follows: "The other that organizes the text is not the (O)exterior [is not exterior to the text]. It is not an (imaginary) object
distinguishable from the movement by which it (Es) is traced. To set it apart, in isolation from the texts that exhaust themselves in the effort to say it, would be to exorcize it by furnishing it with a place of its own and a proper name" (de Certeau:82). Wishing to grasp the incomprehensible in language, logos exorcized it.

It is important to note, at this point, that the terms "polyvalence" and "dissemination" do not name two separate dynamics of language; they are rather interrelated moments in the production of meaning. Polyvalence names the fruitful, expressive aspect of dissemination, while dissemination uncovers the dangerous optimism of polyvalence. It is this latter part of the relation that I would like to emphasize. Polyvalence—the richness of language—is dangerous because it holds out the possibility of final naming. It suggests that meaning can, with enough words, be grasped. It also suggests that meaning can be equated with content—with meanings—rather than with the search for meaning. Curiously, the danger of polyvalence is fixity and literalism.10 This is the lesson that logos learned, for his power-hungry creations sickened him (77.29-30) and, instead of seeing perfection, he saw defect, division, disturbance and tumult (80.15-19). What the text calls the "conversion" of logos originated in a moment of "self-doubt," when the logos realized that "he did not reach the attainment of the glories of the Father" (77.32-35). Angry at the "apostasy" of his constructions, logos underwent metanoia, a change of consciousness (81.19-21).11 "The one who is in the Pleroma was what he first prayed to and remembered; then (he remembered) his brothers individually and (yet) always with one another; then all of them together, but before all of them, the Father" (81.30-35). Logos remembers first the primal gift, language, and

10Derrida's remarks are pertinent here: "If there is thus no thematic unity or overall meaning to reappropriate beyond the textual instances, no total message located in some imaginary order, intentional or lived experience, then the text is no longer the expression or representation (fetishistic or otherwise) of any truth that would come to disintegrate or assemble itself in the polysemia of literature. It is this hermeneutic concept of polysemia that must be replaced by dissemination" (1981:262, italics in the original).

11As I have argued in Miller (1989), the term metanoia literally means "change of consciousness" and so has broader implications than its usual translation as "repentance." According to the Tripartite Tractate, "change of consciousness" is also called "conversion," which, as McGuire has shown, need not carry the restrictive moral connotations established by A.D. Nock in Conversion. According to McGuire, "It is possible, without setting such narrow restrictions as Nock to define conversion as the process by which an individual reorients his or her life to any new pattern of attitudes, beliefs, and practices. Freed from Nock’s criteria of renunciation of sin and commitment to a specific range of thought and practice, the term conversion can apply to a fuller, more representative range of phenomena of religious change" (342). When the Tripartite Tractate says "the conversion which is also called 'metanoia,'" it is pointing in this direction. Conversion can be a turn to another perspective on language.
all that it entails with respect to the desire for knowledge. Giving up the
dangerous optimism of polyvalence brings restoration to fullness and to
the humility of the endless story.

"A blank page is full of paths" (Jabès 1972:54). If full presence—
that which the polyvalence of language seems to promise—is perpetu-
ally deferred by the disseminative function of words, still the idea of
presence functions as a lure—it is what the text desires. Writing is
founded in such desire for the other, for the unnameable that words
attempt to articulate. If the articulation of this desire yields texts that
are only traces of the unnameable, still *they are traces*; they evoke and
allude, yielding ever more paths in the search that constitutes knowl-
edge. Gnostic recognition of the operation of dissemination in language
accounts not only for the way in which their own texts are written, but
also for the manner in which textual authority is conceived. The Gnos-
tic texts presented here are meditations on the operations of language,
and such meditations imply a view of textual authority based on "pur-
suit" rather than on fixity of content, a view that makes ideas of stan-
dards of textual authority (canons) problematic. To explore further how
ideas of textual authority are rooted in perspectives on language’s pro-
duction of meaning, especially regarding the problem of canon, I will
turn to a discussion of the *Gospel of Truth*.13

The *Gospel of Truth* can be read as a text whose primary message is a
hermeneutical one. It is a revelation of the linguistic dynamic funda-
mental to revelation, and its interest is in showing how knowledge is
related to language, and how language is related to authority.14 At the
outset, the text declares that its own name, "the name of the gospel," is
"discovery for those who search" (17.1-4). The text defines itself as
"the gospel of the one who is searched for" (18.12). The *Gospel of Truth*
is suggesting that a text that can be called "gospel" is a text which par-

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12 See, for example, de Certeau (89), who discusses "the labor of writing which is given birth
through the animation of language by the desire of the other"; see also J. Hillis Miller.
13 I have used the translation of the *Gospel of Truth* by Attridge and MacRae (1985a:83-117).
14 The revelatory function of this text has often been noted, particularly with regard to the move-
ment from ignorance to knowledge, which the text both recommends and exemplifies. However,
the text’s revelation has typically been understood as a soteriology (Williams:190-92; Attridge and
MacRae 1985a:74-76; Standaert 1976a:269-70; Ménard:17-24), rather than as a hermeneutic,
although Standaert notes the text’s unity "entre la forme et le fond, entre la présentation littéraire,
la structure profonde de son langage et le contenu de son message" (1976a:269). I base my inter-
pretation here on the *Gospel of Truth*’s insistence on the importance of words and on its characteriza-
tion of its main figures (Father, Son, and Christ) with phenomena of language—the name and the
book.
ticipates in a dynamic of searching and finding. To write is to search, and to search is to write. Further, if "the name of the gospel" is "discovery for those who search," it would seem that what is discovered lies somehow within the text, and not outside it. To look for some extratextual reality to which the text corresponds is, in the words of this text, to fall into a "fog" concerning knowledge of the Father (17.30-31); it is to be a "material one," a child of error who cannot see "likeness" (31.1-4). As in the Tripartite Tractate, attempts to grasp what one is ignorant of lead only to an intensification of ignorance, which is negatively aligned with what is solid and fixed. Ignorance yields only delusory fabrications (17.18-19: plasma). If ignorance in this text is equated with fixed substance, knowledge is understood as a process or dynamic. Best described in its active, verbal form, "knowing" is activated "through the power of the word that came forth from the pleroma" (16.34-35). What I want to argue is that the "power of the word" is the discovery for those who search; the "power" of the word signifies both the hermeneutic of language that the text defends as well as the hermeneutic principles that the text enacts. These two moments in the hermeneutics of the Gospel of Truth are described as the activities of the Son and of Jesus, who represent the two hermeneutical strategies designated by the "power of the word." This doubled figure of the Son/Jesus—doubled since both are described as the hidden mystery within the Father who manifest the Father through

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15 The title of the Gospel of Truth has occasioned a huge literature, which has focused either on (1) whether this text is the same as that referred to by Irenaeus, Adv haer. 3.11.9 or on (2) the fact that the genre of this "gospel" is not the same as the genre of the canonical gospels, whose genre is defined by virtue of their contents (passion narratives with biographical introductions [Koester:162]). Sandaert has noted that it was not until the second half of the second century that the word "gospel" came to signify a "text" rather than simply the message of good news, thus denying the generic status of the Gospel of Truth's title with an historical rather than a canonical explanation (1976b:141). The consensus is that the Gospel of Truth is best considered a homily or meditation on the gospel message and not a gospel properly (that is, canonically) so called. On this whole issue, see the discussion by Attridge and MacRae, 1985a:63-67 and the bibliography appended there. These arguments seem questionable to me. On the one hand, the argument from genre seems unduly protective of the canon; on the other hand, Von Campenhausen's discussion (139ff.) of Marcion's creation of a gospel in a canonical sense before the second half of the second century suggests that the author of the Gospel of Truth, a contemporary of Marcion's in Rome, was aware of emergent issues regarding the privileging of some texts as solely authoritative. Given the argument that follows in the present essay, it may well be that the use of the title "gospel" by the author of the Gospel of Truth signifies a questioning of the then-developing connection between written gospels and canonical authority.

16 Attridge and MacRae note on this passage that "the source of the 'material ones' is no doubt the 'matter' of Error (17.4-20)" (1985b:881).

17 Although Attridge and MacRae translate plasma here as "creation," they note that the term can mean "fiction, pretense, delusion" (1985b:45), and I here follow that alternative translation.
language—functions as the hermeneutical process of the search to which the Gospel of Truth is devoted.

According to Jabès, "Error is the mournful detour which leads to truth, its base and its threshold" (1973:47). When the "totality" fell into a fog concerning the "unnameable, indescribable" one (40.16-17) from whom it had come forth, "it pleased him that his name which is loved should be his Son, and he gave the name to him, that is, him who came forth from the depth, he spoke about his secret things, knowing that the Father is a being without evil. For that very reason he brought him forth in order to speak about the place and his resting-place from which he had came forth, and to glorify the pleroma, the greatness of his name and the sweetness of the Father" (40.23-41.3). As in the Tripartite Tractate, error, that "mournful detour," leads to revelation, a change in consciousness that is linguistically defined in terms of speaking and naming. Furthermore, this revelatory speech, which is a revelation about language, is situated in a nexus of pleroma, name, and the "sweetness" of the Father, all of which pertain to the "resting place" from which "Son" comes forth. Elsewhere called the "warm pleroma of love" (34.30-31), pleroma here designates the erotic fundament of language, the lure of the linguistic desire to name that characterizes the "fullness" of the polyvalent dimension of words.

In a now famous passage, the Gospel of Truth specifies the linguistic conditions of its revelation concerning language:

Now the name of the Father is the Son. It is he who first gave a name to the one who came forth from him, who was himself, and he begot him as a son. He gave him his name which belonged to him; he is the one to whom belongs all that exists around him, the Father. His is the name; his is the Son. It is possible for him to be seen. The name, however, is invisible because it alone is the mystery of the invisible which comes to ears that are completely filled with it by him. For indeed, the Father's name is not spoken, but it is apparent through a son. (38.7-24)

If the Son is "a way for those who were gone astray" and "a support for those who were wavering"—indeed, if the Son is "discovery for those who search" (31.28-33)—what does it mean that "the name of the Father is the Son"?

In a landmark essay, Benoit Standaert pointed out that the relation Father, Son, Name is a linguistic relation:

Parler de Dieu comme Père, c’est le nommer comme tel... Et le nom de père sous lequel on l’ invoque, contient en soi, avec l'idée de paternité, une progeniture, un fils. Cette implication linguistique est
sous-entendue dans tout le développement et le choix quasi-exclusif du mot 'père' pour désigner Dieu dans l'Évangile s'explique peut-être par cette implication . . . (1976a:272). 18

"Father" functions here, as in the Tripartite Tractate, as a signifier of language, that is, as primal linguistic gesture. What lies before, behind, underneath, or above language cannot be said in words: "The Father's name is not spoken."

The relation of language to the unspeakable is carried in the naming that "Father" represents. Speech is founded on absence; as Joel Fineman has noted, "this is the initiatory gap in language upon which the movement of signification, like the trajectory of desire, depends" (302). If "Father" abolishes the presence of the unnameable in its fullness, it nevertheless expresses the desire of language to name. "Father" as linguistic gesture sets in motion a movement of signification: it produces "Son." The linguistic dynamic designated by the phrase, "the name of the Father is the Son," is a demonstration of how the Son can be "discovery for those who search."

"All letters give form to absence. Hence, God is the child of His Name" (Jabès 1972:47). What Jabès suggests here is that recognition or consciousness of God comes only after God has been named; thus "God is the child of His Name." However, the entry of God into language brings with it lack and loss; the presence of God is perpetually deferred by the disseminative slide of words. 19 Furthermore, "Father" as a linguistic gesture signifying the presence/absence of that which language wishes to express is itself occluded when "the name of the Father is the Son." In Fineman's terms, "Father" becomes a "hidden signifier" that "is not entirely absent from the chain which it subtends. It is present through its metonymic relationship to the rest of the chain . . . Both the Son and the Name of the Father are metonymies of the Father himself (i.e., continguously related figures of the Father that represent him whole). As such, as metonymies of the Father, they testify to the absence of the Father in that they continually refer to Him whom they

18With regard to the Gospel of Truth's "quasi-exclusive choice of the word 'Father' to designate God," see now Williams, who makes the same point concerning Valentinus' use and citation of Scripture (193-94). In the context of this essay's discussion, the change from God to Father is significant, since it serves to underscore the linguistic dynamic, as signified by "Father," to which the Gospel of Truth is committed.

19See Fineman (302): "In the Gospel of Truth, 'lack' is defined as an ignorance of the Father which is eventually redeemed through knowledge of the Father. Here again, the pivotal turn calls up a confusing reflexivity: for the Son through whom knowledge of the Father is revealed is at the same time a representation of the very lack that the revelation is intended to redeem."
replace" (301). This is "the dilemma of original signification": "the metonymic movement of the signifiers of desire, all of them a response to the original metaphoric occultation" (Fineman:299).

"Father," then, represents the original metaphoric occultation—what this essay has called the primal linguistic gesture. All writing that attempts to explicate "Father" participates in the same dynamic of dissemination—what Fineman calls the "metonymic movement of the signifiers of desire" (299)—as does the "original" word. The principle operative here, again in Fineman's words, is that "the free play of substitution goes on and on . . . in a series that traces the course of Gnostic desire directly back to the displacements and deferrals initiated by the origin lost through the Name itself" (304). While this finite free play of substitution might seem to be a despairing view of language, it is important to remember that words are signifiers of desire: in the words of the Tripartite Tractate, that which comes forth from the linguistic dynamic expressed by the Father-Son relationship does so "like kisses" (58,24). Language may be disseminative, but it is also polyvalent, such that the search in language for what language abolishes produces an explosive richness in writing. The "other side" of dissemination is polyvalent play: as the Gospel of Truth says, "all of the emanations of the Father are pleromas" (41,15-16).

This polyvalent play of language that engenders writing—that produces texts—is not sheer or mere play, however. It is not without boundaries. As Fineman has pointed out, it is a free play of substitution, of metonymy, in which the hidden signifier is always somehow present. From this perspective, writers place themselves within the chains of signification established by the words themselves. Authors are responsible not to their own imaginations but to the imagination of words. As Standaert noted, words produce other words: "Father" produces "Son." Hence, according to the Gospel of Truth,

Truth appeared; all its emanations knew it. They gazed the Father in truth with a perfect power that joins them with the Father. For, as for everyone who loves the truth—because the truth is the mouth of the Father; his tongue is the Holy Spirit—he who is joined to the truth is joined to the Father's mouth by his tongue. . . . (26.29-27.3)

Truth is linguistically defined here: it is the "mouth of the Father." To speak the truth is to engage language under the sign of "Father" as a movement of signification. Furthermore, to be a lover of truth is to be a writer: "he who is joined to the truth is joined to the Father's mouth by
his tongue.” \textsuperscript{20} Since the tongue is that organ of the human body that allows for the production of speech, to be joined to “Father” in this way suggests both that such writers submit themselves to the disseminative and polyvalent play of language and, most importantly, that truth is found in the production of language—in the writing of texts. \textsuperscript{21}

While the Gospel of Truth conveys its hermeneutics of language in terms of the “Son,” it is in terms of “Jesus, the Christ” that this text meditates on writing and on textual production. If the Son signifies the hermeneutical principle of the unnameable, the Christ signifies the hermeneutical principle of the texts that are produced when language is viewed from the perspective of the Son, that is, from the perspective of the dilemma of original signification and the free play of substitution that it entails. It is to the figure of Jesus that we now turn.

The Gospel of Truth presents Jesus in close association with a text. This text is called “the living book of the living” and it is further described as “the one written in the thought and mind [of the] Father” (19.35-20.1). The connection of Jesus with this book is premised upon the “invisibility” of the “Father of the totality”; the appearance of Jesus signals the writing or the publication of the book. “For this reason Jesus appeared; he put on that book; he was nailed to a tree; he published the edict of the Father on the cross” (20.23-27). \textsuperscript{22} The text makes it clear that taking and putting on this book brings death, yet Jesus knows that “his death is life for many” (20.13). In a passage parallel to this one, Jesus “was nailed to a tree (and) he became a fruit of the knowledge of the Father. It did not, however, cause destruction because it was eaten, but to those who ate it it gave (cause) to become glad in the discovery, and he discovered them in himself, and they discovered him in themselves” (18.24-31).

Again there is a simultaneity or a coincidence of death and knowl-

\textsuperscript{20} Attridge and MacRae note that “it is possible that ‘tongue’ is used here metaphorically for language” (1985b:79).

\textsuperscript{21} Attridge and MacRae remark that “the imagery of the Book underwent a . . . transformation, first referring to what the revealer offers (20.12), then referring to the reality in which the recipients of the revelation are incorporated (21.4), the reality which the recipients in fact are (22.38-23.18)” (1985b:91). In other words, the recipients of the book are the book, and they too “die” into it.

\textsuperscript{22} Attridge discusses Gospel of Truth 20.23-27 as an allusion to Col. 2:14 and sees the text’s strategy here as the defamiliarization of a familiar image in order to emphasize the revelatory character of the passion (1986:246-47). Williams thinks that the passage underscores the salvific quality of the crucifixion (52-54); and Ménard suggests the Isis mysteries (viz. the priestess dressed in a starry cape) as a context for the Jesus wrapped in the book, and says in any case that the book, whether it signifies the pleroma or heavenly origins, must be interpreted mythically (99-100). See also Blanchette. To my knowledge, no one has discussed the Gospel of Truth’s image of the book as a book, as this essay does in the following pages.
edge; death brings, not destruction, but an ongoing process of discovery. The first passage describes this process in terms of the book: just before the Jesus who is wrapped in the book is nailed to a tree, the text describes Jesus as a teacher of the “little children to whom the knowledge of the Father belongs”; “they learned about the impressions of the Father”; “they knew, they were known”; “there was manifested in their heart the living book of the living” (19.20-37). The publication of the book (and the death of its “author”) allows for the rebirth of the book in those who have learned from Jesus. Indeed, the text goes on to say that “those who are to receive teaching [are] the living who are inscribed in the book of the living. It is about themselves that they receive instruction...” (21.3-5). Just as Jesus put on the book and died into it, so too must those who follow in the path of the living book put it on—they are inscribed in it, and it teaches them about themselves.

The Gospel of Truth’s vision of the Jesus who is wrapped in the living book of the living and slain, who is nailed to a tree and becomes a fruit of knowledge of the Father which is eaten, is a complicated one, not least because of its Scriptural allusiveness. If these passages are read together, Jesus is placed both in the Paradisal scene of instruction at the tree of knowledge and in the deadly scene of crucifixion, as though these two scenes implicate each other. Further, the two passages are connected by the appearance in both of the sentence, “he was nailed to a tree.” The first passage, which revises the account in Genesis of the tree of knowledge such that its fruit now gives “discovery” rather than “destruction,” nonetheless imagines that that discovery grows out of death. The second passage, with its repetition of the death on the tree, expands the imagery of the first passage with the image of the book. The “fruit of the knowledge of the Father” (18.25-26), then, is this living book of the living; indeed, this book is the published form of the Father’s thought, the textuality of his mind. Why, then, is the emphasis on death continued—even intensified, since the second passage contains an explicit allusion to crucifixion? What is this living book of the living, whose appearance is simultaneous with the death of its author, the one who by putting it on made it manifest?

According to the Gospel of Truth, “Jesus, the Christ” came to enlighten those “who were in darkness through oblivion...he showed them a way, and the way is the truth which he taught them” (18.16-21). It is my suggestion that the way is a way of writing, a way of understand-

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See Williams (37-41) on the possible Biblical derivation of the idea of a living book from Rev. 13:8.
ing textuality and authorship, and a way of conceptualizing authority with respect to writing. If Jesus embodies the book that is the written form of the Father’s thought, then that text—and the texts produced by others who have the living book inscribed in them—is marked by the same dynamics of play, of polyvalence and dissemination, as is language itself.

“Writing unfolds like a game that invariably goes beyond its own rules and transgresses its limits. In writing, the point is not to manifest or exalt the act of writing, nor is it to pin a subject within language; it is rather a question of creating a space into which the writing subject constantly disappears.” In this statement, Michel Foucault (142) has situated writing in the dynamic of language’s polyvalence and dissemination. Writing is a game—a play—that transgresses its limits, since metonymic movement refuses fixity. Furthermore, by noting the disappearance of the writing subject into the space created by the text, Foucault has emphasized what contemporary critical theory has called “the death of the author.” This phrase, “the death of the author,” has been most succinctly discussed by Roland Barthes (1977), who argued that an insistence on authorship tends to function as a guarantee of the text’s meaning and to restrict a text to its content, thus neglecting the participation of the text, as writing, in the linguistic dynamics as explicated in this essay. “To give a text an Author is to impose a limit on that text, to furnish it with a final signified, to close the writing” (Barthes 1977:147). Authors do not “own” texts but are themselves a function of the polyvalent and disseminative play of language. As Barthes has said, “a text is not a line of words releasing a single ‘theological’ meaning (the ‘message’ of the Author-God) but a multi-dimensional space in which a variety of writings, none of them original [because they are all metonymies], blend and clash” (1977:146).

The death of the author is a sign of the endless narrativity characteristic of language and of textual production. When the author “dies,” that is, when the author is no longer considered to be “the subject with the book as predicate” (Barthes 1977:145), then authority is located in the trajectories of desire that are unleashed by words and by texts. In the Gospel of Truth, the “living book of the living” is “the one written in the thought and the mind [of the] Father” (19.35-20.1); this book is a text viewed from the perspective of “Father” as that sign of the initiatory gap in language from which spring the movements of signification characteristic of language in its fullness and emptiness. This is the book “which no one was able to take, since it remains for the one who will
take it to be slain” (20.3-6). As the hermeneutic of textuality in this text—as the one who “showed a way” with regard to the book—only Jesus can take this book and, in taking it, he is slain. If what is written in the Father’s mind is a perspective on textuality and the writing of texts, the one who publishes this edict and who “takes the book,” who writes in this way, is pictured as wrapped up in the text. The author dies to the authority of endless narrativity, the story without closure, the desire of texts to express what expression abolishes.

This death, which the Gospel of Truth underscores by its repetition of the phrase “he was nailed to a tree” and by its bringing together of the Paradisal scene of instruction with crucifixion, nonetheless unleashes “life for many,” a journey of discovery from text to text, endlessly. Texts understood in this way are a living book of the living: like words, texts also exist in a metonymous or disseminative relation to each other25; they also are subject to “the free play of substitution that goes on and on . . . in a series that traces the course of Gnostic desire directly back to the displacements and deferments initiated by the origin lost through the Name itself” (Fineman: 304). In this regard the Gospel of Truth says of Jesus, “He draws himself down to death though life eternal clothes him” (20.29-30). “Life eternal” marks the way of textuality and writing understood as passage and as traversals of desire.

Texts understood in this way are also a living book of the living. Those who follow in the way shown by Jesus are “inscribed in the book of the living. It is about themselves that they receive instruction, receiving it from the Father, turning again to him” (21.3-8). These are the ones “whose name the Father has uttered” (21.29-30). To be named by “Father” is to be situated in language and in writing under the sign of the death of the author. If the followers of Jesus are also writers who take the book (and Standaert, 1976a:257-58, has noted the blurring of distinctions, or the blending of identities, between Jesus and his disciples), then they too are subject to the play of writing where, in Foucault’s words, “it is a question of creating a space into which the writing subject constantly disappears” (142). This kind of author “knows in what manner he is called. Having knowledge, he does the will of the

24 Attridge (1986:246), Williams (41-44), and Ménard (96) all see this passage as an allusion to Rev. 5.9, in which only the Lamb is worthy to take God’s scroll and “to open its seals.” If this passage in the Gospel of Truth is indeed an allusion to Rev. 5.9, the Biblical text’s emphasis on the opening of the seals is significant to the Gospel of Truth’s point about textuality and underscores my reading of this passage as a hermeneutical comment in the text which describes what the text itself is doing hermeneutically.

25 For a discussion of current theories about intertextuality, see Leitch (87-122).
one who called him . . .” (22.8-11). Furthermore, “He who is to have knowledge in this manner knows where he comes from and where he is going” (22.13-15). These “living ones” know that they and their texts are situated in the metonymic slide of meaning; that is where they have come from, and it is where they are going. The life of that journey is the desire in language, the lure of meaning set in motion by words, while the “hope” of the living, “for which they are waiting, is in waiting” (35.2-4).

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Jabès writes: “Mark the first page of the book with a red marker. For, in the beginning, the wound is invisible” (1972:13). The wound of the book is that no book is final; no book can say “pleroma” at last. The hope lies in waiting, that is, in writing, in tracing the paths that multiply on the blank sheet of paper. The Gnostic texts discussed here view writing under the sign of the trace, the “fingerprints” left by absence. Words are traces engendered by the disseminative dynamic of language, and so too are texts, only on a larger scale. All texts are traces; the disseminative slide of meaning in language will not allow for the privileging of any text as exempt from its dynamic of deferral and loss. Hence to designate any particular text or group of texts as “Scripture” which guarantees the context and limits of meaning, or to conceive of “tradition” in such a way that it becomes an Author which predicates meaning in texts, constitute erroneous views of textuality and language, from the perspective of these Valentinian texts. Such erroneous views have not suffered the wound of the book.

As the concluding portion of this essay, I would like to address briefly a Gnostic revisioning of the idea of “canon” as it pertained to the interpretation and appropriation of “Scripture.” The import of my remarks grows out of what has been said thus far concerning language. Now I would like to situate these issues historically, and will again focus on the Gospel of Truth, since it was written during the century in which early Christian understandings of canon are said to be rooted.

Harold Attridge, along with many others, has observed that “the author of the Gospel of Truth apparently knows and uses a large number of the writings of what came to be the canonical New Testament,” although “in no case do we find an explicit citation of a New Testament

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26Typically, this phrase has been understood metaphorically as a statement of celestial origins. See Ménard (107-8).
28See footnote 1.
text as scripture or even as an authoritative source" (1986:242). The Gospel of Truth alludes to passages from the Synoptic Gospels, the Johannine literature, and the Pauline corpus, but it "renders no explicit judgment on the authoritative status of the works to which it seemingly alludes" (243). Most recently, Jacqueline Williams has published a book entitled Biblical Interpretation in the Gnostic Gospel of Truth from Nag Hammadi which "demonstrates conclusively that Valentius did in fact use many of the writings that would form the New Testament..." (8). Williams finds the Gospel of Truth's use of texts "intriguing" because those texts are never quoted verbatim (175). Noting "the complete absence of explicit citations" in the text, she remarks that its author "evidently considered the texts that he used to be significant, but there is no overt indication of their importance" (176).

Both of these scholars note the allusive qualities of the Gospel of Truth's style. Attridge, remarking upon the "fluidity and polyvalence of the terminology" (1986:252),29 argues that the dynamic of the text is a juxtaposition of the familiar with the unfamiliar; familiar images from what would later be canonical texts are juxtaposed with and so reinterpreted by unfamiliar (that is, "unscriptural") metaphors (1986:242). The bulk of Williams' work details which passages from the nascent New Testament have been used by the Gospel of Truth and how those passages have been appropriated by the text. Noting that it is typical of the author's style "to incorporate a melange of allusions" (91), she finds that this style makes identification of precise parallels difficult because "his interpretations are interwoven with his allusions" (11). An example of this allusive, juxtapositional style has already been discussed in this essay (the placing together of Paradise and crucifixion), and Williams offers many more.

The Gospel of Truth has been dated in part on the basis of this allusive handling of prior texts. The assumption seems to be that its lack of explicit citation of its precursor texts signals a pre-canonical perspective on the use of texts (Attridge 1986:243). Views of the text's allusiveness extend beyond issues of dating, however. Attridge, arguing from the interplay of familiar and unfamiliar images, concludes that "the text becomes a carefully constructed attempt to domesticate the unusual and to minimize the potentially problematic" (1986:255). Further, he argues that "the text conceals major elements of the system which it presupposes," so that "through a careful manipulation of traditional imagery,

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29Standaert has also pointed out the "supple and polyvalent" qualities of the Gospel of Truth's use of language (1976a:238-59).
the text inculcates and reinforces a fundamental theological perspective that stands in some tension with important elements of that traditional material" (255). Allusive style has here become a strategy to insinuate a content into traditional material that alters that material in the direction of what is essentially described by Attridge in terms of an Irenaean view of the Gnostic heresy. Thus the text, in his view, has a "pretext," a content which is concealed by allusion so that ordinary readers might be seduced into the text's hidden agenda. Williams also finds that the Gospel of Truth's style can be explained on the basis of the author's desire to change the content of its percursor texts. On one level, she argues, the author has not been "faithful" to the texts which he interprets: "Valentinus consistently retains enough of a reference to allow a reader to recognize its source while he changes key terms and even ideas" (189, 202). The author thus "alters the theology of the Biblical text" and disregards the context of his sources (189). Again, there is an assumption that "original meaning" in traditional texts or books has been somehow intentionally changed by the Gospel of Truth, and that that change is signalled by the text's style.

There is, I suggest, another way to understand this text's relation to tradition and to the nascent canonical passages to which it alludes without accusing the text of suppressing its own difference in the interest of seduction and without charging the author with a willful misuse of texts. What I want to argue, using Roland Barthes' terminology, is that "the logic that governs the Text is not comprehensive (seeking to define 'what the work means') but metonymic; and the activity of associations, contiguities, and cross-references coincides with a liberation of symbolic energy" (1979:76). This liberation of symbolic energy that happens in the interplay between the Gospel of Truth and Biblical texts does not pervert the percursor texts; rather, there is "a serial movement of dislocations, overlappings, and variations" (Barthes 1979:76; emphasis added).

It is the slide of meaning that is highlighted, as the energy of language is activated. The Gospel of Truth does not subscribe to a view of Tradition and Canon (even in its pre-fixed form) as arbiters of original meaning; it subscribes to another view of authority, another view of "canon."

While it is true that the Gospel of Truth does not quote explicitly from New Testament texts, this lack of verbatim citation need not mean that those texts were not in some way authoritative. Allusions from one text can live on in another text as touchstones in the continuous desire for meaning that writing sets in motion. There is structure in such a relationship, since the later writer has read the earlier text and has so placed his writing in the chain of significations unleashed by that earlier text.
There is structure, but there is also decenteredness and lack of closure: the text that marks the point of origin continues to write and to be written in the texts that follow. Authority here is a process, not a content of meaning.

That the *Gospel of Truth* exemplifies such a sense of authority is not due to the fact that it was written prior to the fixing of the canon of the New Testament. Even though the word "canon" was not used to describe the New Testament as a fixed collection of normative documents until the mid-fourth century (Grant:285), still the *idea* of canon as an authoritative standard was being discussed and enacted in the mid-to late second century, the very period during which the *Gospel of Truth* was written. Indeed, in Rome in the 140's C.E.—the presumed provenance of the *Gospel of Truth*—the Christian writer Marcion proposed a Christian "Scripture," a canon composed of one gospel and several Pauline letters whose intent was to regulate, in fact to close, the contents of Christian meaning (Von Campenhausen:148-74). Sacred story had become sacred book. Marcion's sense of authority, rooted as it was in theological content and a conception of "original" or pristine meaning, was adopted some forty years later by Irenaeus of Lyons who, although he did not accept Marcion's *version* of the New Testament canon, nonetheless did accept the *idea* of canon that Marcion initiated (Von Campenhausen:182-203). The point is that the *Gospel of Truth*'s allusive handling of Scriptural texts does not mean that this text was written in ignorance of issues of "canonicity," even though the canon had not been officially fixed; ideas concerning Scripture and Tradition which would eventually be carried in the Church's understanding of canon were already circulating in the period and place in which this text was written.

Irenaeus, who had contacts in Rome but did his writing in Lyons in the 180's C.E., is credited with the definitive statement of a four-gospel canon in direct response to Gnostic, and particularly Valentinian, writing (*Adv. haer.* 3.11.8; see Von Campenhausen:196-99). Irenaeus' critique of his Valentinian opponents is basically that their writings pervert "the Scriptures": "such, then, is their system, which neither the prophets announced, nor the Lord taught, nor the apostles delivered..." (*Adv. haer.* 1.8.1). Their writings are not rooted, in other words, in "tradition," conceived of as an historically-transmitted, discrete body of knowledge (*Adv. haer.* 3.2.1-3.5.3). Irenaeus says further,

They gather their views from other sources than the Scriptures; and... they weave ropes of sand, while they endeavor to adapt with an air of probability to their own peculiar assertions the parables of the Lord, the
sayings of the prophets, and the words of the apostles, in order that their scheme may not seem altogether without support. In doing so, however, they disregard the order and the connection of the Scriptures. ... By violently drawing away from their proper connection, words, expressions, and parables whenever found, [they] adapt the oracles of God to their baseless fictions. (Adv. haer. 1.8.1)

As Rowan Greer has explained, for Irenaeus the Valentinian misuse of Scripture "lies in the failure of the Valentinians to use the Rule of Faith as the hypothesis in rightly ordering the passages of Scripture. Irenaeus, of course, regards Scripture and the Rule as no more than different aspects of the Apostolic Faith" (166-67).

As far as Irenaeus was concerned, Gnostic interpretation of Scripture was out of control; he thought that they were using their own rule of faith as a control on the meaning of texts. Because Irenaeus defined Scripture historically and saw its content as an original revelation rooted in the past, he imagined that his opponents shared his understanding of Scripture (the later canon) as equal to its contents; their error lay in their adoption of a different theological model for interpreting Scripture (Adv. haer. 1.9.1-4). For Irenaeus, meaning must always come to closure in and by means of a "Rule of Faith." And although he put his finger on some of the effects of Gnostic textuality—disregard for the order and connection of Scriptural passages, and so on—he has not understood the perspective from which the Valentinians approached interpretation.

Irenaeus understood Scripture and Tradition as an Author; what came to be called canon functioned for him to guarantee, to specify, and to close the contents of meaning. The Gospel of Truth, on the other hand, understood what came to be called canon hermeneutically; its concept of authority was rooted not in the past but in the present, and grew out of its understanding of the dynamics of language. For this text, "the author is never more than the instance writing. ... The scription is born simultaneously with the text, is in no way equipped with a being preceding or exceeding the writing. ...; there is no other time than that of the enunciation and every text is eternally written here and now" (Barthes 1977:145). This is a performative view of textuality, based on dissemination, which makes of canon a very different concept.

When Irenaeus uses the term "the Scriptures," he means by it what later came to be called "canon": a restricted list of books that have a privileged claim to original meaning or divine truth. Implicit in Gnostic theories of language and textuality, however, is a revised understanding of the idea of canon—that is to say, of the notion of Scripture itself. We have already seen the Gospel of Truth declaring itself to be "the gospel of
the one who is searched for" (18.12-13). To write is to search, and to search is to write; such is the dynamic at work in "gospel"—in Scripture. Scripture, or canon, is in this sense a figure for an ongoing quest, not a concept for fixed authority. As one contemporary author has put it, "If canon is what is written, writing itself seems to be unable to take a place in the canon—there is something radically uncanonical about writing itself" (Readings:157). Further, "To read the canon as figure of writing is to read the canon against itself because it is to recognize canonicity as inherently deviant from any fixed form which a canon might assume... The canon functions in a manner that exceeds its content" (156).

A major scholarly assumption is that early Christian understandings of canon developed as a reaction to Gnostic interpretation of Scripture.\(^\text{30}\) I would suggest now that the argument was concerned, more basically, with conflicting understandings of Scripture as canon, and not with the sudden, reactive appearance of an entity, "the Scriptures," that we now call canon. The definition of canon that the modern world has inherited from the ancient argument is Irenaeus' definition: it is a fixed measure, a ruler, a regulatory principle, an authoritative standard (Metzger:282-87, 289-93). But this definition has occluded another meaning of the Greek word kan\(\text{\-n}\) that might fittingly be applied to the Gnostic sense of Scripture that I have been exploring, namely, that canon is something used to keep a thing straight, like a weaver's rod, the reeds of a wind organ, or the crossbar of a cithara (LSJ, s.v. kan\(\text{\-n}\)). A canon, in this sense, gives shape, frame, support foravings and musical fantasies. Here, canon is not identical with its content, since many tapestries can be woven upon the same loom. Rather, canon is a figure for the shaping element within any message; it is the activity of weaving (or writing), not the cloth or the exegesis itself. Thus canon is not a content or collection of texts so much as a texture of relationships undergirded by the desire in language signified by both its disseminative and its polyvalent dynamics.\(^\text{31}\) "The written canon is undermined by its own writing," and the search goes on (Readings:165).

When Gnostic texts juxtapose the familiar with the unfamiliar, when they open up Scriptural texts with unscriptural figures, they are obeying the "alien voice" of words, of writing, and of textuality. Scripture becomes that blank page full of paths, and the highest respect that one

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\(^{30}\) See, most recently, Metzger (75-90).

\(^{31}\) On relationships between text and texture and their relationship to religion, see the suggestive essay by David L. Miller.
can pay to it is to write on it. The dilemma of original signification is also an opportunity to engage in the endless narrativity signalled by an understanding of canon as figure for the process of textuality. The way in which Gnostic texts relate to Scripture, as well as the theories of language which such texts both expound and enact, exposes their view of literature as a projection of desire. Just as words produce other words, so texts produce other texts in an endless quest. The "living book of the living" is a continuous process of discovering that the book is a lure.

In an essay entitled "Literature as Projection of Desire," Italo Calvino has written a passage that conveys aptly a Gnostic understanding of the relation between canon and texts: "The ideal library that I would like to see is one that gravitates toward the outside, toward the 'apocryphal' books in the etymological sense of the word: that is, 'hidden' books. Literature is a search for the book hidden in the distance that alters the value and meaning of the known books; it is the pull toward the new apocryphal text still to be rediscovered or invented" (1986:60-61). As the Gospel of Truth says, "this is the word of the gospel of the discovery of the pleroma" (34:35-37), the library hidden in the book.

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