Published as _*Essay* in *On_Culture: The Open Journal for the Study of Culture*
(ISSN 2366-4142)

NOTES TOWARDS AN AESTHETICS OF CELEBRATION

FREDERIK TYGSTRUP

frederik@hum.ku.dk

Frederik Tygstrup is Professor of Comparative Literature at The University of Copenhagen. Originally specialized in the history and theory of the European novel, of which he has published a number of monographs, he has over the last decades worked at the intersections between literature, geography, medicine, affect studies, politics, economy, and the study of culture at large. Recent publications include *Finance Aesthetics: A Critical Glossary*, Goldsmiths University Press 2024 (with Torsten Andreasen, Emma Brogaard, Mikkel Krause Frantzen, and Nick Huber) and *Infrastructure Aesthetics*, De Gruyter 2025 (with Solveig Daugaard and Cecilie Ullerup Schmidt).

KEYWORDS

Literary theory, infrastructure studies, interdependence, aesthetic experience.

PUBLICATION DATE

Issue 20, May 31, 2026

HOW TO CITE

Frederik Tygstrup. "Notes Towards an Aesthetics of Celebration." *On_Culture: The Open Journal for the Study of Culture* 20 (2026). <https://doi.org/10.22029/oc.2026.1580>.

DOI: https://doi.org/10.22029/oc.2026.1580

On_Culture: The Open Journal for the Study of Culture
Issue 20 (2026): Celebration
www.on-culture.org
https://doi.org/10.22029/oc.2026.1580

Notes Towards an Aesthetics of Celebration

_Abstract

This _*Essay* explores how the notion of celebration can reveal some aspects of the social life of literature that are rarely considered in literary theory. Defining celebration as the production of a festive and appreciative event by gathering together, it is argued that literature can accordingly be seen as a locus of celebration where different peoples' lives cross and a sense of 'we' is negotiated and experimented. To make this argument, focus is shifted from individual texts to literature as an infrastructure for producing, circulating, and using texts, assembling writers, editors and critics, libraries and bookshops, discourses about literature, and the teaching of and research into literature. This infrastructure, it is argued, can instantiate a celebrative being-together due to three qualities: 1) Because it allows writers and readers take a reflective stance toward language, it endows literary language with the power to describe the word differently and to conjure imaginary universes and beings. 2) It installs an aesthetic relation between writer and reader where the reader puts her own sensibility in the service of realizing the potential offered by the literary work, making the life of literature into an exercise in being together, being interdependent and premised on one another. 3) We not only interact with literature; we also interact with each other about literature. Each of us have different capacities and capabilities when we use the affordances for imagination provided by the text, and we will realize a text's potential using our imaginative powers each in our own ways. These three characteristics of the modern infrastructure of literature are indispensable components in experiencing literature as a celebration: it gathers us into a public and creates a common for our interaction.

> Maybe you are not yet the one who is reading, or maybe it is already no longer exactly you; who knows, it is reading in you and you are listening to the one who, in you, reads. —Peter Szendy[1]

1_

Celebration is mostly considered in terms of that which is celebrated. We think by way of identifying objects (*what* is being celebrated?) rather than considering the practices and agency involved (*how* are we celebrating?). Nonetheless, both dimensions are written into the notion of celebration itself: *celeber*, in Latin, translates "1. frequented, much visited, thronged, crowded, populous, abounding; 2. honoured, renowned, distinguished, celebrated, famous."[2] Accordingly, what we would take for the primary signification—the object that is predicated to be "honoured, renowned, distinguished, celebrated, famous"—is in fact only secondary to the practical modality of celebrating, namely, to become "populous";—to *assemble*, in other words.

https://doi.org/10.22029/oc.2026.1580

So, essentially, celebration is about producing something festive, ebullient, and appreciative by gathering together. In this sense, celebration is also a kind of self-celebration, the promotion of a 'we,' first person plural celebrating itself. One individual cannot celebrate, only dedicate or appreciate. Unless, of course, the one already claims to be a multitude, like Whitman, notoriously:

> I celebrate myself, and sing myself,
> And what I assume you shall assume,
> For every atom belongs to me as good belongs to you.[3]

The opening lines of *Leaves of Grass* aptly navigates the first person singular into the first-person plural. By inviting everybody to take part in it, the poem presents itself as a locus of celebration, a voice of the multitude. Celebrating, in Whitman, is about calling forth a 'we' which is not in place, not just yet, but still presupposed by the very act of writing poetry.

This is celebration in a special sense, then: celebration as an act of literature. From Whitman's verses, we may infer that 'literature'—among other things as well—designates a particular kind of encounter between an 'I' and a 'you.' There is a poet, the one who makes a thing out of words, and there is a reader, someone who accommodates the thing made of words and tries to make sense of it. And there are all the others, of course, who engage with this challenge, each in their individual way and with the singular resources at their disposal, sometimes alone, sometimes together.

This is the point that I will try to make: that literature is a locus of celebration, an artificial crossing between different peoples' lives where a sense of 'we' is being negotiated and experimented with. An ingenious piece of social alchemy.

2_

The first step in developing this argument must necessarily be historical. What we today call 'literature' is the result of a significant cultural and institutional transformation. Whereas literature long referred simply to what was written and the erudition it conveyed, the modern notion of literature designates a specific domain of aesthetic writing: *Schöne Literatur*, *Belles-lettres*, the sphere of artfully crafted texts.

This transformation is commonly understood to have unfolded in Europe during the eighteenth century, crystallising around a new valuation of fiction and imaginative writing. In England and France, authors such as Henry Fielding and Mme de Staël came

https://doi.org/10.22029/oc.2026.1580

to represent this transition, and a few decades later, the Romantic movement in Germany more explicitly emphasized literature as an artistic practice with its own aesthetic norms, expressive capacities, and philosophical significance. It is within the horizon opened by this eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century transformation that the modern idea of literature became thinkable. Catherine Gallagher has observed that

> [i]n England, between the time when Defoe insisted that Robinson Crusoe was a real individual (1720) and the time when Henry Fielding urged just as strenuously that his characters were not representations of actual specific people (1742), a discourse of fictionality appeared in and around the novel, specifying new rules for its identification and new modes of nonreference.[4]

Fictionality—the feature that allows literary texts not to have referents in the empirical world, in favor of imaginary worlds plausibly understood as non-actual versions of the one we know and acknowledge—becomes a founding feature in instituting literature in its modern sense, and hence in the Romantics' version a vehicle for the unleashing of the utopian powers of imagination.

This change might not be detectable on the surface of any individual text, not in the first place, anyhow. What changes is the way in which certain texts are read and appreciated as imaginary tales. In accordance with the propensity for speculation that characterized the European mind during that age—the age that not only invented fiction, but also paper money and probability calculation—these tales became a new kind of experiment, images of possible lives that still retained the thrill of looking a lot like lives that could appear in environments familiar to the prospective readers. What had changed was the social convention that now allowed readers to look at certain texts—texts that might still seem to report on real beings—as speculations free to dream up possible beings. Thus emerged a social convention that came to afford unprecedented amounts of writing, by setting out to excavate the vagaries of the imaginary and all the possible realities that suggest themselves beyond the known real possibilities.

The invention of literature in the European eighteenth and nineteenth centuries was in fact the instantiation of a new *infrastructure*: an infrastructure for producing, circulating, and using texts, and an infrastructure that would eventually come to comprise a new guild of fiction writers, the profession of editors and literary critics, libraries and bookshops, periodicals and commercials, and, importantly, a new understanding of literary texts that downplayed expectations as to the acquisition of

https://doi.org/10.22029/oc.2026.1580

knowledge about the real world in exchange for access to a new and endlessly generative universe of speculation. This entire infrastructural circuit has over the last couple of centuries consolidated the existence of 'literature' in the new meaning of the term that remains current to this day. It has been constantly fuelled by the substantial economy that has accompanied it, entering into reciprocal arrangements with the adjacent sectors in the modern capitalist economy, and it has ensured the ongoing reproduction and refinement of the social roles and practices attached to inhabiting the field of literature through European modernity as a collective source of imagination.

3_

Literature in this modern sense demands that writers and readers take a *reflective* stance toward language. Writers and readers share a mundane, everyday language that is used to designate and predicate real beings and situations in the world; but they also share a different experience of language, a second language superimposed onto this first language, which might be indistinguishable from the first but, crucially, *functions* in a different way. In a 1963 essay written for the French avant-garde magazine *Tel Quel*, Michel Foucault proposed this description of the language of fiction:

> Fiction does not arise because language is at a distance from things; language is their distance, the light in which they appear and their inaccessibility, the simulacrum where only their presence is given; and any language which rather than forget this distance maintains itself within it and maintains it within itself, any language which speaks about this distance in advancing within it, is a language of fiction.[5]

Literary language is a language that no longer bridges the distance between words and things in an act of signification or predication. If the linguistic act would normally terminate, as it were, in the realm of the real which it names or otherwise elucidates, literary language remains on the side of the words. Here, it explores those powers of language that reside precisely in its non-coincidence with what it can name: the power to describe the world differently (in Foucault's words: 'to speak about the distance'), and the power to conjure imaginary universes and beings (to 'advance' within the distance). In both cases, literature cultivates a language—or, more precisely, is an infrastructure for the cultivation of a language—that can use words to say things we didn't have words for and to name imaginary whims that cannot be vouched for by any tangible thing we know of. Foucault's notion of *distance* economically summarizes the new self-consciousness of literary language that emerged in eighteenth-century Europe

https://doi.org/10.22029/oc.2026.1580

when a new idea and new uses of literature were gradually implemented in a nascent modern literary infrastructure.

The argument, then, is that the modern infrastructure of literature has become a space for textual practices that can occasionally describe *what is* in new and productive ways and occasionally evoke something which *is not* with enthralling suggestiveness. This idea of literature—indeed, this expectation of literature, developed and refined by literary theory and aesthetic theory at large since Romanticism—is radically different from earlier conceptions of the use (and usefulness) of literature. Within this new aesthetic regime, literature is no longer a medium for instruction in proper style or education in the prevalence of eternal truths; the art of literature has become instead a persistent and cherished token of *alterity* amidst the prosaic bourgeois world in which it comes into being.

This alterity of literature is in turn ultimately important for the ways in which literature can become a social locus of celebrating. In a recent book, David Joselit describes the alterity of art in this way:

> [E]very work of art has two bodies, a material substrate with its own mortality, and an image or series of images characterized by immortality. […] In other words, every work of art testifies to the paradoxical impossibility of representation—its material and conceptual precarity—because no work can achieve perfect transparency of its substrate to its image. It would not be art if it did.[6]

Joselit here outlines the most basic, primitive condition of the life of art. Art is matter formed by an artist; the beholder, for her part, senses this matter and then, sometimes, makes sense of it. The two bodies of art, then, are the materialized work of art on one side, which has its own precarious life: the materials can wither, the contextual conditions of experiencing it can change, its references can shift. And on the other side, the sense someone makes of sensing it: the image that remains in the beholder's mind and body after the encounter, and, consequently, the many images that live on in many beholders' minds and bodies, the different kinds of sense it makes to different beholders, and the long historical series of sensuous meaningfulness it might have set in motion. Joselit's reflection is concerned with visual art and the art object's obvious dual mode of existence as a thing and an image. It is, however, also immediately applicable to literature when we understand literature as a use of language that insistently reflects (and reflects upon) the distance between the words and the things

https://doi.org/10.22029/oc.2026.1580

they refer to and exploits this distance to invent non-referential modes of signification. In this view literature also inhabits two bodies: the words on the page as the mortal matter, and the images they help readers produce as an ever-renewable source of imagination.

This is a central axiom of our modern understanding of the arts: their existence as art originates neither in the work of art nor in the mind of the beholder, but in the aesthetic relation between the two. The mode of existence of art is the encounter between two fundamentally incompatible instances: the (material) image placed in front of the beholder and the (mental) image left in the mind of the beholder. In the sphere of art, there is no solid link between these two images. If the artwork did actually transmit a piece of information or some other finite package of meaning to every beholder, then it would be communication, not art. For something to be art in our modern sense, it bets its potential meaningfulness on the event of the encounter with somebody, its beholder, and, consequently, with its public. Again: we should be numerous to celebrate.

Every such event is, in Joselit's words, a "performance of alterity"[7]: the work of making sense of the sensate encounter with the otherness of the artwork. This event, in turn, is shaped by the art infrastructure. The event is prepared, primed, hosted, framed, facilitated, and leveraged by institutions, professionals, discourses, pedagogies, and much more. It takes this entire social system to curate the art encounter and condition the beholder to embark properly on the performance of alterity. Infrastructures, in general, facilitate the processes they are designed to underpin. But they also frame and limit them, guiding them to happen in predictable ways. Accordingly, the art infrastructure is not limited to ensuring that the beholder is brought before the canvas and exacting that she makes a reflective judgment; it also prescribes a number of ways in which the beholder can appropriate the otherness of art. Joselit shows how the modern museum has offered notions that can keep the wild alterity of art in check by suggesting auxiliary concepts that can tie the perplexing experience of otherness to the artist (this is a Renoir), or to the nation (this is a masterpiece of French art), to the work as a valuable commodity (it was sold at Sotheby's for 10 million dollars), and so on. The art encounter is social because the art infrastructure is a societal edifice. As such, it provides the conditions of possibility for engaging with art, but also the constraints that come with the business models of its institutions, ranging from the modes of

https://doi.org/10.22029/oc.2026.1580

engagement with art's alterity they offer to the mechanisms of inclusion and exclusion that condition the participation of different segments of the public. Against the backdrop of this institutional framing, the celebratory performative event of art unfolds in two different dimensions.

4_

First of all, the aesthetic encounter is an eminently social situation: a situation where the environment in which the work of art originated intersects with the environment of its apprehension by a beholder, a contact zone between the work put into the creation of an aesthetic object and the work of imagination unleashed at its destination. This is not the way we normally encounter an object. There are things we use to achieve the fulfilment of a task and other things we just recognize as being there. But the aesthetic thing can only endure as such if we choose to engage with it and accomplish the work of imagination it calls upon us to perform. In *Loving Literature*, Deidre Lynch has studied eighteenth-century English practices of reading, judging, and generally relating to literature to identify the "cultural work" that went into learning to appreciate literature in its modern sense and hence to "naturalize a modern, narrow, and aestheticized notion of literature."[8] A central finding is that modern readers needed to learn "the strategies enabling them to think of their intensely felt transactions with their reading matter as something other than enthrallment to empty fictions or empty rhetoric and to think of literature, instead, as the locus of ethical transactions whose essence was human contact."[9] Art demands this investment: it demands that I as a reader (or beholder, or listener) commit to putting my sensibility in the service of realising the potential that the alterity of the artwork offers.

'Loving literature' is a historical affect with huge existential implications. Reading, listening, and looking according to the rules of the aesthetic regime offer the recipient a rare and powerful experience of imagining something devised by somebody else, of learning to imagine by following the protocols and triggers that have been inscribed in the artistic material. The aesthetic relation, therefore, is a *mediated* social relation—facilitated by the artwork—between someone who created the work in a specific situation and someone who encounters it in a different situation: a social relation mediated by a thing. To make the work, the artist exteriorizes a part of herself in the matter she is modifying, and to accomplish the work, the beholder interiorizes impulses

https://doi.org/10.22029/oc.2026.1580

originating from the work when making sense of the sensation. Or, as this relation has been neatly formulated by Paul Valéry: "[A] work of art is the transformation of something in order to transform someone."[10]

To better understand the nature of this relation, we can compare it to the communicative relation, with which it has some common features, as well as some essential differences. As in communication, the aesthetic relation has a sender and a receiver, and just as in communication, there is a medium between them that is inscribed, as Gregory Bateson famously put it, with "a difference that makes a difference," as well as channels that permit the artist to display the artwork to its public. What is missing, however, is what is otherwise considered to be the central element of the communicative act: the message, the piece of information to be brought from A to B. Or more precisely: the message cannot be isolated and identified as a neat parcel that is to be funnelled securely from A to B, for the simple reason that both sender and receiver participate in making it. Sender and receiver *collaborate*, the sender (artist) leaves her mark on her material ('transformation of something') and the receiver (beholder, listener, reader, etc.) is challenged to find a way of appreciating the material work she encounters ('transformation of someone'). In art, the 'content' or the 'message' is radically undetermined; it is not something that can be simply transmitted, it must be co-produced in a communal celebration of the eventual advent of meaning.

The work of art as a meaningful—indeed loveable—thing exists thanks to the joint work of the artist and the beholder. The two are separated and together at the same time; they meet in absentia. This is what the event of performative alterity means: a strange encounter which is also a non-encounter. Art, in this sense, is an exercise in being together, being interdependent and premised on one another. The writer alone before the keyboard, the reader alone before her screen are both very much being themselves in the work they perform, but at the same time they are each other's existential premises for being engaged in the meaning of the words on the page. This is not a sociality of friends, people who know each other and get along together. This is an anonymous being-together, the smallest possible community—one in which we both nurture certain expectations—of making sense of a sentence. One might call it a *derivative* togetherness: not you and me together, but your presence in the text I am reading and my presence in the images the text prompts me to generate. Our co-presence is derivative in the sense that your presence is not you, but something provided

https://doi.org/10.22029/oc.2026.1580

by you, and my presence not me, but something I produce as I am prompted by your work. We both use the artwork to produce derivatives of ourselves, to go beyond ourselves.

Hence, the celebration taking place under the aegis of the aesthetic relation is one of closeness and distance at the same time. It is a gathering that celebrates the potential advent of meaning by way of jointly attending to the artwork. And it is a gathering that presupposes that we both change and develop derivative sides of ourselves that we did not necessarily know about beforehand. This is the protocol for achieving 'ethical transaction' based on 'human contact' which, according to Deidre Lynch, describes the historical structure of feeling associated with literature.

In a recent book about the experience of reading, Michel Chaouli suggests that we understand this mediated human contact as one of *intimacy*. For Chaouli, intimacy does not designate an experience of bodily or spiritual closeness, as the everyday use of the word would imply, and it is not some sense of communion between an empirical reader and an empirical writer; rather, it "has something impersonal, something public about it, something that remains opaque to the I itself."[11] Hence, intimacy—the experience of intimacy when reading a literary text—is a disclosure of something which immediately appears important, but also unfamiliar, unknown or somehow not assimilable to the known perimeter of the self. It is close and distant at the same time. Close, in that the experience of intimacy reveals the existence of something in the 'I' that is inaccessible to or at any rate hitherto unnoticed by the self. And distant, in that it does not necessarily point inwards, but *away* from myself, as if it were a part of myself that belongs elsewhere, not in an interior dimension, but as something shared, something eminently public. Chaouli's notion of intimacy captures something important about the derivative self that emerges from the social situation of reading, a self that is not centred on the social and psychological evidence of being somebody, but doubly displaced toward affects that are not yet truly ~~dompted~~ as being mine and toward relations and interactions which make up the other side of me, constantly making myself, over and over. In Chaouli's words:

> The place where I am a stranger to myself—this impersonality in my person—coincides with the place where my speech and my making cease to be mine alone and open to a public dimension. The opacity to myself is a blockage, yes, but it is also a catapult: it launches me into a world replete with other human beings, with

https://doi.org/10.22029/oc.2026.1580

> language, desire, technology, power, history, and other dimensions of human existence.[12]

The celebration inherent in the social situation of reading combines, somewhat paradoxically, recognition and defamiliarization. When I recognize something—and this recognition is what prompts the sense of intimacy—I can only embrace it by defamiliarizing myself, by looking for the intimate sense of being somehow touched in *other* places than the ones known and cherished as mine, that is, finding something of mine outside of myself. And, importantly: I embrace it by finding it in the thick of what is essentially shared, in language. Reading literature, reading like we have learnt to read when we read literature, I now and then come across a twist, an idiom, a fold in the social mesh of language that allows me this glimpse of intimacy that momentarily skews my habitual self. Valéry again: a transformation of something that transforms someone.

Maurice Merleau-Ponty comes very close to Valéry's insight when he glosses the effective and at the same time oblique relation between the writer and her reader. For Merleau-Ponty, the starting point of writing is not the act of inscription, the tracing of letters on a surface. The starting point lies earlier: writing originates in sensation, when a body is being affected and attempts to make sense of the affect. And one of the means of making sense is to re-trace this affect by inscribing it onto the body of language, "autre corps, moins lourd, plus transparent."[13] Writing is a *fac-simile*: it reiterates the modification of the body that took place in the act of sensation by modifying the body of language accordingly, that is, by arranging the expressive material of language in such a way that it expresses the original affect. This is how the writer derives herself in language and leaves her trace, and this is how the reader meets her by reenacting the modification of another body that has been imprinted in the language they share. Precisely as Chaouli has it: intimate and impersonal at the same time. We come numerous, not to be our everyday selves, but to become something better than that as we celebrate.

5_

Then there is also a second social dimension in the 'performative event' of literature. As we have already seen, the existence of literature as literature is dependent on the contract between the writer and the reader that the latter should accomplish the work initiated by the former; there is no literature if the potentials for imagination inscribed

https://doi.org/10.22029/oc.2026.1580

in the literary text are not transformed into actual imaginaries in the mind of the reader. The empirical book is not literature; it is only a pile of ink-dotted paper. As literature, its mode of existence is one of *solicitation,* at Bruno Latour has pointed out,[14] it needs to—indeed demands to—be read and revived in somebody's imagination. The literary work of art has an addressee. A text can be written for any purpose or for no purpose at all, but to become literature, it must solicit a readership. This solicitation lies at the bottom of the social relation between the writer and the reader. In addition to this intimate relation between writer and reader, however, literature also instigates an implied, lateral social exchange between the members of the public it solicits. The alterity of the literary work of art is a challenge: how do you, my public, make sense of this? Hence, for the individual reader, this is a challenge shared across the entire public. When I map out mid-nineteenth-century London in my imagination while reading Dickens, or when I contest the morality of a character in Houellebecq, I extrapolate from a set of clues provided by the text as to how I can construe the streets of London or the mind of a twenty-first-century male loser; I partake in the making of the fiction. But I also know that, because of the non-coincidence of words and things and the irremediable alterity of literature as it explores this gap, others may apprehend it differently. This sounds like an instance of solipsism, leaving me by myself in front of the inscrutable alterity, but it is in fact the contrary, as Hannah Arendt has so brilliantly demonstrated: "The subjectivity of the it-seems-to-me is remedied by the fact that the same object also appears to others though its mode of appearance may be different."[15] This is the lateral sociality of literary celebration: we need to talk. Each of us has different capacities and resources when we use the affordances for imagination provided by the text, and we will 'fill the blanks' (as the saying was in Konstanz in the seventies) using our imaginative powers each in our own ways.

This plurality is sometimes seen as a conflict of interpretations, and much scholarship has been dedicated to the problem of competing readings, arguments for better readings versus poor readings, 'strong' readings and the need for hermeneutic accountability. Arendt here gives us a different approach. Given the alterity of the work, it is designated to call forth divergent understandings, and what is important, when following Arendt's interpretation of the predicament of appearances, is precisely the plurality. We should not fear plurality but embrace it and profit from the many possible ways of understanding a work, which will eventually allow us to deepen our

https://doi.org/10.22029/oc.2026.1580

thinking about it. If it is true that literature has an openness to it that allows for approaching it in multiple ways, and if it is true that literature exists not as texts but as the life of these texts, then plurality must be the form in which it manifests itself. The more the merrier. One of the wonderful things about literature is that it makes us chatty; it is as if we—all of us readers—spontaneously acknowledge that our contributions to literature, the images we create in our minds based on the templates written in books, are important. We evidently like to talk about literature, and using literature or 'loving literature' has for centuries been a main ingredient in the bourgeois culture of conversation. We not only interact with literature; we also interact with each other about literature. And both are indispensable components in experiencing literature as a celebration. It gathers us into a public.

The very notion of public is complicated, however, both historically and conceptually. Trevor Ross argues that it is historically caught between a liberal acknowledgment of the freedom of others and a republican belief in a common commitment, and that the modern use of the term is "bound to seem alternately reductive and naïve, a myth belied by complex historical realities and an idealist smoothing over of multiple contradictions within liberal thought."[16] Without attempting to resolve these historical complexities, it should be noted that the idea of a plural rumouring has nonetheless become a household feature in modern aesthetic thinking. *De gustibus disputandum est.* This of course features prominently in Kant's evocation of a common sense as the cornerstone of any reflective judgment of taste. The judgement of taste is tricky: it is directed at an object that cannot be subsumed under a univocal concept because it has too many qualities and no conceivable hierarchy between them, and it consequently needs to be validated not in terms of its correctness, but in terms of the consensus it can muster. This is, by the way, the reason why Hannah Arendt found that the most relevant contribution to political thinking in Kant's philosophy was precisely his aesthetics. What is at stake, anyhow, is that chattiness amongst reading people is in fact a quite unique instantiation of reasoning *together* and *without rules*, upholding, however faintly, a memory of the proto-democratic republic of letters that was envisioned in the early days of the Enlightenment.

The lateral social exchange involved in the literary infrastructure is invested with the unruly concept of the public and its different real-world instantiations, including

the many publics that are not really public where literati listen to themselves speak. But it also comes in a more oblique form than the immediate (or indeed mediated) conversation between readers. Chaouli approaches this oblique dimension in this way:

> [E]ven when I insist that I am just "scribbling notes to myself" or writing for (or to) no one at all, I take part in a world beyond myself. Since language can never be my private domain, I am in the mesh of the public world the moment I seek words that are a match for an encounter with something that holds significance for me.[17]

The idea is as crucial as it is simple: 'literature' is an intervention in the collective emporium of language. Accordingly, then, in addition to actual publics that consist of discernible individuals, together in a place or distributed in space, there is a *sense of a public* in the ways language is modified, exchanged, and adapted in the performative event of literature. Participants in the literary infrastructure gather together in an exploration of how language as a collective body—Merleau-Ponty's "less heavy, more transparent body of language"—can be appropriated and individually fitted to an experience of celebration enacted between a writer and a reader. Consequently, we might perceive the contours of the indeed populous shadow public in the background, lurking behind the language we have in common.

6_

The primitive sense of taking part in such a shadow public emerges every time an experience carved into language at one place is shared somewhere else, across the innumerable individual differences presupposed in the idea of a public. Literature is an instrument that conditions language to not only transmit information, but also, however briefly, to gather together and share an experience. To wit, look at this passage from Maya Angelou's memoirs:

> In my memory, Stamps is a place of light, shadow, sounds and entrancing odors. The earth smell was pungent, spiced with the odor of cattle manure, the yellowish acid of the ponds and rivers, the deep pots of greens and beans cooking for hours with smoked or cured pork. Flowers added their heavy aroma. And above all, the atmosphere was pressed down with the smell of old fears, and hates, and guilt. / On this hot and moist landscape, passions clanged with the ferocity of armored knights colliding. Until I moved to California at thirteen, I had known the town, and there had been no need to examine it. I took its being for granted and now, five years later, I was returning, expecting to find the shield of anonymity I had known as a child. / Along with other black children in small southern villages, I had accepted the total polarization of the races as a psychological comfort. White existed, as no one denied, but they were not present in my everyday life.[18]

https://doi.org/10.22029/oc.2026.1580

In this short memory sketch, Angelou efficiently evokes the spontaneous feeling of homeliness, not in itself, but as it appears when seen from the outside, conditioned by being a Black body in the violent post-war South. Hence, the memory acknowledges what the unquestioned sense of home felt like and at the same time the presence of violence as an indelible bedrock of the life in the village. This experience comes across in a literary idiom that skilfully progresses through juxtapositions between present and past, between childhood and adolescence, between Southern vernacular and Western distinctiveness, between memories of atrocities and aspirations for the future, between immediate sensation and subsequent reflection.

The mnemonic image manages to convey a sense of spontaneity that could otherwise not be relived immediately—like a past stage of naivete that one can no longer access by evoking it reflexively, drawing its contour through its negation from a series of different angles. In this way, the image itself preserves the memory of spontaneity as a visceral affect that can be accessed only in this new language that has been made specifically to preserve, and eventually share, this particularity. In pieces of literary engineering like this one, we might come face to face with Chaouli's spectral public, a sense of being numerous together thanks to the sudden encounter with the shareability of an otherwise strictly contextual experience through a language that subtly knows how to redistribute the distances between words and things.

Reading does this: it invites us to live a parcel of other people's lives, to share the affects that traverse those lives, and to do it together with others whom we expect to share a similar experience. In doing so, it introduces a supplementary dimension of anonymous intimacy, not only with the writing of others that touches us, but also with others touched by the same writing.

This is the celebratory alchemy of literature, its power to affirm a certain sense of being-together notwithstanding the social, cultural, and geographical distances that separate us. Hence the importance those socialised to 'love literature' bestow on the written page as a site of alterity that can facilitate and afford processes of becoming. By exploring the distance between words and things, literature allows writer and readers alike to question and recalibrate the modes of being in the world they know about and the images they are able to make of this world. This is exactly what Maya Angelou appears to imply when summoning us: "Gather together in my name."[19]

https://doi.org/10.22029/oc.2026.1580

_Endnotes

1 Peter Szendy, *Powers of Reading: From Plato to Audiobooks*, trans. Olivia Custer (New York: Zone Books, 2025).

2 *LatLex Mobile*, s.v. "celeber," accessed May 27, 2026, <www.latinlexicon.org>.

3 Walt Whitman, *Leaves of Grass* (London: Penguin Classics, 2017).

4 Catherine Gallagher, "The Rise of Fictionality," in *The Novel*, ed. Franco Moretti (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006), 336–363, here: 344.

5 Michel Foucault, "Distance, Aspect, Origin," trans. Patrick French, in *The Tel Quel Reader*, eds. Patrick French and Roland-Francois Lack (London/New York: Routledge, 1998), 97–108, here: 104.

6 David Joselit, *Art's Properties* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2023), 8–9.

7 Joselit, *Art's Properties*, 3.

8 Deidre Lynch, *Loving Literature: A Cultural History* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2015), 9.

9 Lynch, *Loving Literature*, 12.

10 quoted in William Marx, *Libraries of the Mind* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2025), ch 3, n. 37.

11 Michel Chaouli, *Something Speaks to Me* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2024), 25.

12 Chaouli, *Something Speaks to Me*, 148.

13 Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Le Visible et l'invisible* (Paris: Gallimard, 1964), 200.

14 Bruno Latour, *An Inquiry into Modes of Existence: An Anthropology of the Moderns*, trans. Catherine Porter (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2013), 249.

15 Hannah Arendt, *The Life of the Mind* (San Diego: Harcourt, 1978), 50.

16 Trevor Ross, *Writing in Public: Literature and the Liberty of the Press in Eighteenth-Century Britain* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2018), 7.

17 Chaouli, *Something Speaks to Me*, 4.

18 Maya Angelou, *Gather Together in my Name* (New York: Random House, 1974), 76.

19 Angelou, *Gather Together*.