Redefining the Literary Event: Derek Attridge on AI, Authoredness, and the Ethics of Reading

Zheng Jie & Derek Attridge

Abstract: This conversation with Derek Attridge examines the ontological reconfiguration of literature under digital disruption. Focusing on AI's challenge to authoredness—Attridge's conceptual framework for textual intentionality—the conversation explores how algorithmic text generation destabilizes traditional author-reader dynamics. Attridge argues that such technological mediation necessitates redefining literary responsibility: even machine-produced texts demand ethical reader-response as they channel collective human experience. While acknowledging AI's potential to generate inventiveness, he maintains that singularity, the transformative power of literature, remains contingent on the human reader's open, embodied engagement ("the act-event"). The conversation further contends that emerging forms, such as digital and interactive literature, extend rather than diminish literary theory's relevance, urging adaptive critical frameworks. Ultimately, Attridge posits technology as a catalyst for literature's evolution, affirming the irreplaceability of human creativity in sustaining the vitality of the humanities.

Keywords: Derek Attridge; authorship; reader-response; literary singularity; Artificial Intelligence (AI); digital literature

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标题：文学事件再定义：德里克·阿特里奇论人工智能、作者性与阅读伦理

内容摘要：本次对话探讨了文学在数字冲击下的本体论重构。对话聚焦于人

工智能（AI）对"作者性"——阿特里奇用于指涉文本意图性的概念框架——的挑战，深入剖析了算法文本生成如何动摇传统的作者－读者动态关系。阿特里奇认为，此类技术中介作用要求我们重新定义文学责任：即使是机器生成的文本，因其传递着集体人类经验，也要求读者作出伦理性的应答。尽管承认 AI 具有产生创新性的潜力，但他坚持认为"独特性"（即文学的变革力量）始终依赖于人类读者开放、具身化的参与（即"行动－事件"）。阿特里奇进一步主张，新兴形式（数字／互动文学）并非消解而是拓展了文学理论的相关性，呼吁建立适应性强的批评框架。最终，他将技术视为文学演进的催化剂，并肯定了人类创造力在维系人文学科生命力方面不可替代的作用。

关键词：德里克·阿特里奇；作者性；读者反应；文学独特性；人工智能；数字文学

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This conversation intervenes at a critical juncture in literary studies, where the rapid proliferation of Large Language Models (LLMs) and algorithmically generated texts has prompted urgent theoretical reconsiderations. While digital humanities scholarship has extensively mapped formal transformations in electronic literature[1], the ontological implications of AI for core literary concepts—authorship, intentionality, and readerly ethics—remain undertheorized. Derek Attridge's seminal work on the singularity of literature and textual event provides a crucial framework here, positing literature as an irreducibly human encounter. Yet his theories emerged in a pre-generative-AI era. As ChatGPT-style systems increasingly mediate literary production—exemplified by hybrid "human-machine co-authored" works like *The Inner Life of AI* (2022)—Attridge's concepts necessitate re-engagement. This conversation addresses a conspicuous gap: the absence of systematic reflection by leading literary theorists on how computational text generation recalibrates fundamental categories of literary analysis. By extending Attridge's notions of authoredness and reader responsibility into the algorithmic age, the exchange

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1   See N. Katherine Hayles, *Electronic Literature: New Horizons for the Literary*, Notre Dame: The University of Notre Dame, 2007; Jessica Pressman, *Digital Modernism: Making it New in New Media*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014.

charts pathways for literary theory's continued vitality.

Zheng Jie (hereafter Zheng for short): Professor Attridge, we are truly grateful for your generosity in accepting our invitation for this conversation. Your scholarly work spans a wide range of topics, from James Joyce and poetry to African literature and literary theory. I've noticed that your understanding of literature often centers around the relationships between the three elements of literary works, authors and readers. I was particularly intrigued by your later use of the term "act-event" instead of just "event," which emphasizes both the passive and active roles of the reader in engaging with the text. While you mentioned it's not the perfect term, I find it interesting because it highlights how readers can be both passive and active in their reading experience. In this framework, the act of reading isn't just about interpretation and judgment; it also involves deeper ethical concerns. After finishing a work, the reader may think differently about the world.

Now, in the context of the digital age—where literature is often consumed in fragmented, rapid ways, such as reading snippets, quotes from Nobel Prize winners, or short passages from famous Chinese authors—to what extent do you believe that literature still retains this same ethical and transformative function? How might the reading experience in this new context reshape or challenge the traditional roles of author and reader you've outlined?

Derek Attridge (hereafter Attridge for short): We're all trying to finding our footing in a rapidly changing landscape—one that's not just specific to China but global in scope. Recent developments in AI and digital technology have suddenly brought to the forefront issues that were previously operating in the background. For example, we've seen computer-generated poems as early as the 1960s, which shows how far ahead some people were in recognizing the potential of technology in creative work (Coetzee was one of these). Of course, digital forms have been around for some time, but only recently have they become so prevalent.

Writers, like artists, have always been alert to the possibilities of new forms of media and new resources in the sensory world, the world of language, the world of visual stimuli, and so on. So, while you're right that the forms of literature you're talking about are more fragmented in nature, I'm confident that they will be taken up by writers in creative and singular ways. I don't for a moment think this marks the end of literature—it's actually a new beginning. We may not yet fully understand how this will happen, but I'm certain that there will be important, beautiful, moving, and powerful ways of using platforms like TikTok or the bite-sized nature of digital content that we haven't encountered yet.

What's more, I think this will also bring about new forms of responsibility, and what constitute a responsible reading or a responsible interaction. It may be less a question of reading and more a question of responding. If I'm presented with a six-word quotation rather than a 100,000-word novel, obviously, my response will be different. I don't have a clear answer yet on what these new forms of creativity or interaction will look like, but I'm confident that they will emerge.

Zheng: I know that many scholars are quite suspicious of these changes, and some prefer to take a more wait-and-see approach. So, I'm glad to hear that you're confident and open to embracing these changes. I think you're right—if we remain open to this transformation and recognize that our reading habits are evolving, then there will be new forms of responsibility for scholars to explore. This shift in reading practices could lead to new areas of research, where scholars will need to understand and analyze how responsibility plays out in these new, rapidly changing forms of media.

Attridge: We can think of similar examples in both literary and other media. Take the invention of photography, for instance. When it first emerged, painters must have been horrified. Suddenly, someone could press a button and instantly record an image that would have taken a painter weeks to produce a good one. Yet, photography eventually became its own art form, and now we don't think of painting and photography as being in competition. They each have their own space, and the emergence of one didn't erase the other—it simply expanded the possibilities for artistic expression.

Zheng: In fact, we even see new forms of painting that try to combine traditional techniques with the features of photography or digital media, blending the two in innovative ways. Yet, the traditional forms of painting still exist, and they continue to hold value. In much the same way, I believe that the rise of digital media won't negate traditional forms of literature, but will instead open up new possibilities for how we engage with texts and how we define literature itself.

Attridge: Exactly.

Zheng: You've consistently engaged with the concept of authorship, which, as I understand it, emphasizes the work as the product of an author's intentional act. In your conversation with Francesco Giusti, you address the question of how creative reading can still take place when it leads to departures from authorial intention. Given the rise of collaborative, multivocal, and AI-driven text generation,

how do you see the concept of authorship evolving in a world where texts are increasingly produced by such processes? For instance, in 2022, a book called *The Inner Life of AI: A Memoir by ChatGPT* was published. It received a 3.5-star rating on Amazon, and the cover credits both ChatGPT and the human prompter (a person named Forrest Xiao) as authors. This blurring of authorship between a human and a machine presents an interesting challenge. So, in this new digital landscape, how might the concept of authorship shift when the line between human and machine contributions becomes increasingly difficult to draw?

Attridge: This is a fascinating question. Let me start by discussing the concept of authorship that I had in mind when I first wrote about it, and when I introduced the somewhat awkward term "authoredness." I coined this term because I was thinking from the reader's perspective. When we read a text, we usually assume it's the product of some authorial intention and authorial consciousness. We might not know who that authorial consciousness is, but we engage with the text as though it's the result of conscious design. That's why I use this abstract term authoredness—to describe how we read something as the product of an authorial intention, even if the authorial intention might be completely different. For example, there's an example sometimes I use in discussions of these issues. Imagine I'm walking along the beach and I find a stone that appears to have some words written on it, I might initially think, Someone has inscribed a little poem here, a haiku. I read it as a literary work, enjoying it for what it seems to be. But then, I realize that the marks on the stone are just random scratches, made by the action of pebbles in the sea. Once I understand that, the text stops being a literary work because it doesn't possess the quality of authoredness. It's no longer a poem; it's just random scratches. When we read, we typically assume that the text has been created by an author. However, the term author can be misleading, especially if we think of it as referring to just one person. An individual is drawing on resources which other people have contributed. You're using a language which is a public shared resource rather than anything that belongs to you personally.

Even the concept of a single author is complicated. Quite often, a work of literature is the product of multiple authors influencing one another through adaptations. Take a play for example: Who is the author? There's the actual author who wrote the text. But there are also the actors who might reshape it during workshop rehearsals, the director who interprets the script, and the designers who shape the visual elements of the performance. A huge number of people have been involved in producing the event that I am witnessing. I still think of it as authored, even though there are many intentions involved. For example, when I go to see *The*

Caucasian Chalk Circle by Brecht, part of me is responding to the characters as if they were real people. I'm following the trials and tribulations of this woman with her child through the changing political landscape, and I'm deeply involved in her challenges, her suffering, and her eventual triumph. I feel these things as if they were real experiences. At the same time, I'm responding to Brecht's work. I'm aware that Brecht made choices—he wrote the speech, decided on the action, created the character. And I'm enjoying that aspect of the experience too. I'm enjoying the involvement in the characters' struggles, and I'm enjoying the way Brecht has put everything together. But it doesn't stop there—I'm also enjoying the work of the director who made this particular production, and the skill with which the actors are representing the characters. Authorship is complicated. There is a complete difference between seeing the heroine struggling in the snow with her baby, and actually going outside and seeing a real woman in the snow, struggling with her baby. In the latter case, there is no author behind it. It's simply someone enduring hardship. That's the crucial distinction between authored and non-authored.

Now, what about the work prompted by a human author, but written by ChatGPT? Is it authored? Who is it authored by? I would say it's authored by both. There's a human prompter who's given ChatGPT some suggestions as to what sort of text to produce, and then ChatGPT draws from its massive database to produce something according to the norms of the genre or style it's been instructed to use. What this process highlights is that, even before the advent of AI, the older notion of author was already a notion of a blend between the technical and the human. Every artist uses technology. Writing is a technology. Even before the advent of computers and word processors, writing with a quill or a brush is technology. It affects the way people write and the way we read that writing. The use of literary resources, the use of generic conventions, the traditions of metaphor, or the tradition of meter in poetry are all technical devices that the human author mobilize.

In the case of AI, we must be careful not to draw a sharp distinction between human productivity and machine productivity. They blend, they interact. Clearly, in AI-generated works, the mechanical part of the process is a much larger percentage and the human part is much smaller. But there is no total difference.

Now, let's speculate: Imagine in the future a computer with a sufficiently large database, one that encompasses all the literature ever written in all languages. This machine is asked to produce a new novel of the highest quality. I pick up this novel and read it. It's powerful, moving, original—everything a great literary work should be. I have no idea where it came from. But then I find out it was entirely produced

by a computer, without any human prompting, just a command to write a novel. These are hypothetical questions, but they're fascinating ones. Would I then dismiss it and say I was wrong to engage with it as a literary work? If I thought I was responding to a human author but was actually responding to a machine, would I acknowledge that the machine has now got the capacity of producing real literature? My responsibility as a reader would remain the same: My responsibility is still to be attentive to the text, to open myself to what it's doing, to appreciate the way the language is handled, and to engage with the ethical and political issues it raises.

I'm not entirely sure what the answer is, but I think it's possible that the time will come when we need to adjust our notion of literary responsibility and literary response to allow us to enjoy in the fullest sense, be moved by it, and be changed by literature produced by a computer.

To help us navigate this shift in how we respond to literature, it would be helpful to acknowledge something I mentioned earlier: that we've always been responding to something mechanical in literature. To return to Derrida's idea, there is no purely organic or natural origin. There's always machinery at the heart of things. The language I use is already a machine. Language itself is a technical device, and in a sense, it speaks me as much as I speak the language. Therefore, I'm like a robot—I'm a machine using the technical device that's been allowed to me.

Zheng: Your hypothesis actually aligns with your understanding of the ethics of reading. You mentioned that when we discover a text is entirely written by a machine, without human input, we should still approach it as responsible readers. Considering the fact that humans are dealing with real, lived issues when they write—issues rooted in their experience of reality, how is the concept of the ethics of reading redefined when texts may no longer emerge from authorial intention? How might the responsibility of readers differ from the responsibility we have when reading texts written by humans?

Attridge: I said earlier that our traditional ways of responding to what we think of as human-authored texts are also, in a sense, responses to a kind of machinery. Now, putting this the other way around: even if a text is completely written by a computer, it's still full of human material, because the computer is nothing more than an accumulation of human text. This machine has absorbed millions and millions of words written by humans. The protocols and instructions guide how a novel is written, what people find enthralling and moving and powerful in novels— all based on human input in order to produce this novel. So, despite the fact that the text might be generated by a machine, it's all of human origin. Therefore, I don't

think the responsibility of the reader is significantly different. It will feel different, of course. But in fact, we're still responding to human creativity, albeit channeled through a new device.

Zheng: Yes, I agree with you. If we try to redefine the experience of the ethics of reading, it might not really come from just one individual's experience anymore. Rather, it could be something that reflects the collective experience of humanity. After all, the machine is drawing on such a vast array of human-generated content that its creation process might not be tied to any one person's perspective. The way the machine generates its text could reflect broader human experiences, issues, and emotions, things that resonate across humanity as a whole. We don't know exactly how the machine will create, but in a sense, it's presenting something that's shaped by all of us. So, when we read a text created by a machine, it's not just one human perspective we're responding to—it's a reflection of the collective human experience, channeled through the machine.

Attridge: I think you're right. The otherness produced by the machine is not entirely different from the otherness produced by a single human author. In the end, it's up to the reader to determine that distinction. This brings us back to what I was saying earlier about the difference between literature and non-literature: it's in the reader's response that the distinction is made. If readers encounter something that feels other, it's not just a mechanical feature—it's something that opens up new possibilities for them.

But there's a range of otherness. Sometimes, we encounter something so foreign, so unintelligible, that it has no impact—it's otherness that can be ignored. Imagine, for example, a computer producing text that's essentially unreadable: it might be full of glitches, nonsense, or a stream of disconnected words that don't form coherent meaning. There are millions of potential forms of otherness like that, generated by a machine, that would hold no interest for us. But the kind of otherness I'm talking about is the otherness that we actually can incorporate in some way. The other becomes part of us, in a way that changes us, reshapes us. The key point is that it has an impact on us.

So how do we know if a computer has produced something that is genuinely other and that explores new realms of potential human experience? I think it's only when readers feel that way. And an individual reader is always, as I was saying, a representative of a culture or many cultures. There's no algorithm that guarantee success. You might say, This computer is really good at writing novels, and the next thing it writes is rubbish. The quality of a text, whether written by a machine or a

human, can't be predicted in advance. It's only in the act of reading that we can say, This is really moving. And not just by one reader, but perhaps by many readers in a given culture. So, there's still randomness. Maybe "randomness" isn't the right word, but the point is that it can never be guaranteed in advance.

Zheng: Yes, I think we're coming full circle to the question we discussed earlier: What is literature?

Attridge: Absolutely.

Zheng: We've talked about the reader and the author, and also discussed the experience of otherness. Could you revisit your concepts of inventiveness and singularity of literature in this context? How do these qualities relate to our understanding of literature, particularly when we're considering texts created by machines versus human authors?

Attridge: Yes, I think we might have to redefine some of these concepts, especially when we're dealing with machine-generated texts. My argument about inventiveness, for instance, is closely tied to otherness, and singularity— they're really three different perspectives on the same thing. But if you think in terms of inventiveness, you're thinking specifically about the way a work of literature enters the cultural field and changes it. A truly inventive work does something that the cultural field couldn't do before. It introduces some way of thinking that was previously unthinkable but now becomes thinkable, thanks to the creativity of the writer who has found a way of bringing the other into the field of the same. Inventiveness, in my thinking, is very much tied to the creative work of an author—or a group of authors, or even an author and a director. It doesn't necessarily have to be a single author, but it still requires some individual or collective effort with remarkable capacity to bring into consciousness something that had been hidden, excluded, or unavailable.

Now, if we're thinking about a computer, it gets tricky. Can a computer be said to bring something new into the world through its creativity? Can a computer actually be creative, or is it just processing algorithms, vast sequences of zeros and ones? That's essentially what it's doing. And I'm not sure. What I've argued about human authors, or groups of authors, is that they create literary works because they are alert to the possibilities within the culture they inhabit. They're aware of the tensions, the fractures, and the gaps in that culture—these are the spaces where something new can emerge.

A computer, however, can't be said to do that in the same way. It's processing

information. But, I suppose, theoretically, if a computer were fed not just billions of texts but also billions of data about the culture in which a novel is to appear, maybe it could be, in some way, inventive. It could, in theory, identify an area in the culture where certain ways of thinking have been excluded and find a way to bring them into being.

Zheng: The answer to the question seems to depend on how you define inventiveness.

Attridge: It's possible, though, to turn this on its head. What is a creative or inventive writer, really? You could argue that an inventive writer is essentially a kind of mega computer. As a writer, I'm a mega computer computing the world around me. If I write something inventive, it's because I've computed that the world needs to hear something it's not hearing. For example, I compute that there's no sufficient attention to the life of trees, but we need to be more attentive to the extraordinary contribution the tree life makes to all life on earth. And I might write something like Richard Powers' *The Overstory*, which, as you may know, is a brilliant novel about trees. You could say that Richard Powers is an extraordinary "human computer" who has computed that his culture needs this story, not just for the information, but needs to be moved in this way, needs to be made to feel the importance of trees. If he can compute that, and if he can draw on his resources as someone who's read, presumably thousands of novels, and knows the English language extremely well and has the ability to put words together in a beautiful, moving and powerful way, is Richard Powers just a certain kinds of computer? It's a hard question. We like to think of him as having a soul, as being human, but in a sense, his brain is a kind of mega computer. His brain is probably millions of times more powerful than any existing computer. But the question is: what if one day there would be a computer that could do what a human brain can do? I think we'd have to say it's being inventive. Of course, that's all hypothetical, and it's probably not something we'll see in our lifetimes, at least not mine. But it's an interesting thought experiment.

Zheng: I think we both agree that computers can't replace human beings as readers. Even with AI-generated literature, we still need human readers to perceive and respond. This point seems to echo your discussion about the singularity. You argue that the singularity lies not just in the works themselves, but in the encounter between the works and the readers. Could you elaborate more on that relationship between the work and the reader?

Attridge: You said it beautifully; it's precisely about singularity. We could

talk about the notion of the event, which we haven't really explored yet, but for me, the literary work as a literary work—not just as a piece of writing on the page or on a screen—is an event. It's an event that is also an experience, involving both a text and a reader. It's an event and an experience, an act insofar as the reader puts energy, attentiveness, and knowledge into what is often called rewriting. It's an event in that the reader must be open to what the work is telling them.

So, singularity is something that emerges. We should talk about singularity arising; it's something that happens, not a static quality. This is why I believe that even if computers eventually produce powerful and moving works, it will only be readers who determine their value. Readers respond creatively and inventively to these produced texts, finding some of them singular and inventive, while others may be seen as trivially pleasurable or unreadable. Ultimately, it will always be the reader who is central. Singularity, for me, is at the heart of that.

Zheng: I think the emergence of AI-generated literature is just one example of how things are changing. But beyond that, we're also seeing other evolving forms of literary practice, such as digital literature, interactive storytelling, and multimedia novels. Sometimes, especially in interactive or digital literature, the role of the reader seems to blur, and they might even become a kind of co-creator or writer in the process. Do you think these new practices challenge or require a rethinking of the traditional theoretical frameworks we've used to analyze literary texts? How do you think these new forms are reshaping our understanding of what constitutes a literary text? And how do we rethink the relationship between text, reader, and even author in these emerging forms?

Attridge: This is not just a hypothesis; it's actually happening. I think my earlier answers already hint at this. What's happening is that we have to more fully recognize what our traditional ways of theorizing about literature and writing literary criticism really are.

Reading literature is more complicated than we once thought. In fact, we've always been reading multivoiced texts, even when we believed we were reading something with a single voice. And, as active readers, we are rewriting what we read in some ways, and we are multimedia. For example, when I read a poem, set out in a certain way on a page, I'm responding visually to the text as well. It's true that we need to change. We need to find ways of articulating these different creative practices, but we also need to recognize that we've always been engaging with elements of these practices. We've always had brief texts, multimedia texts, and interactive texts, even if they weren't always recognized as such. There's no sharp

break between old methods and new methods. Instead, there's a continuity. So, I think it would be a mistake for a literary critic to dismiss new forms by saying, I can't deal with this new stuff because I do criticism in the old way. I'd argue that even traditional criticism was more complex than simply reading words. You were always responding to all sorts of things and you were responding in a creative way.

As for your question about preserving the critical and ethical rigor of traditional literary criticism: I believe you can be just as rigorous in responding to newer forms of literature as you could to older forms. I don't think there is a huge difference. Of course, if we're going to look at a specific new form, we'll need to dive into the details and see how we approach it.

Zheng: When we talk about new forms of literature, it's easy to think of them as completely new, as if they've emerged out of nowhere. But, in reality, we can always trace elements of these new practices back to older forms. They don't represent a total break from tradition; they're more like a continuation or an evolution. Literature, as a discipline, has always been on the path of revolutionizing itself.

As a leading scholar in literary theory, how do you view the future of the discipline, especially given the current challenges facing the humanities and social sciences? Many people acknowledge that these fields are under pressure. Do you believe traditional literary theory will still remain relevant? You've touched on some of these issues in our earlier conversation, but do you think there will be a fundamental reorientation of the field in response to technological, social, and cultural shifts? And, if so, could you offer us a hopeful perspective on the future of literary studies, something to inspire us as we look ahead?

Attridge: Unfortunately, the humanities are facing tough times globally. I do believe in what I call the pendulum theory. Right now, that pendulum is swinging strongly toward the sciences. More and more students are opting for scientific fields, while fewer are choosing humanities or social sciences. I don't know about the situation in China, but here in the UK, for example, the government has been pushing children in schools toward subjects like maths, science, and physics. However, the new government has recently made a push to bring music and art back into the curriculum, which is encouraging. I think there will come a time when society realizes that, in prioritizing science—let's call it the "algorithmic" approach to life and to value, the culture starts to feel impoverished. You are cutting out a huge amount of what is most vital to human flourishing.

If everything on Earth is reduced to a series of zeros and ones, it might seem

like computers could take over. But, as I've been saying, a computer could only take over if we as human readers respond to it in a way that is literary, which is to say, not black-and-white, cut and dried, but open, exploratory, emotionally powerful, potentially life changing. So, that's my hope. While there is a danger that the current trend of favoring a scientific attitude—driven by economic imperatives that many governments around the world are pushing—could impoverish our culture, I believe that this will eventually be recognized.

I believe that, in the end, the writers, artists, and those of us who love literature will come into the light again. Maybe that's just my innate optimism. It's not a formal theory—more of a hope. The pendulum theory isn't really a theory either; it's the hope that our cultures will swing back toward recognizing the value of the humanities. We do need hope. But I don't think it's all that bad. Wonderful works of literature are still being written. Incredible plays are being performed. And millions of people around the world are engaging with them—being moved, challenged, and inspired. People are still finding beauty and power in the arts. That hasn't gone away. In fact, some governments are starting to recognize that there's real economic value in the arts. That's a positive development. There is, of course, a tension between the commercial instinct and the purely artistic one, but sometimes these can coexist in productive ways. For instance, in Britain, calculations have shown that the creative industries contribute billions of pounds to the economy each year. Tourism in Britain is driven in part by its art—by the plays, museums, and cultural landmarks that attract millions.

I don't think it's all negative. Yes, it's tough to begin a career in the humanities right now, but I still believe it's worth it. The life of the mind—not just the scientific mind, but the life of the literary and creative mind—is one of the most fulfilling paths I've ever encountered. The richness of engaging with literature, art, and human thought—it's something irreplaceable.

Zheng: Thank you for this illuminating conversation. Your insights have been incredibly enriching, and we truly appreciate the hope and positivity you've shared about the future of the humanities. It's been a great privilege to engage with you on these important topics.

Works Cited

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