Literature in the era of distant writing:
A new paradigm between the death of the author and the role of the (open) reader

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores how Luciano Floridi's recent concept of 'distant writing' fundamentally reshapes the nature and future of literature in the age of Large Language Models (LLMs). Building on Franco Moretti's notion of distant reading, Floridi demonstrates how authorship shifts from direct textual production to the design of narrative constraints, transforming the writer into a meta-author. Reframing this shift through Roland Barthes' idea of the 'death of the author' and Umberto Eco's concepts of the 'open work' and the 'model reader,' this paper argues that literature now unfolds within a new paradigm: what is here termed 'distant literature.' In this model, the author's traditional authority dissolves, while the reader's role expands to that of a co-designer and active interpreter of generative, machine-mediated texts. At the same time, the paper critically problematizes the metaphor of 'machine enunciation,' clarifying the status of artificial intelligence (AI) not as an intentional co-enunciator but as an operator or medium whose outputs nevertheless produce enunciative effects for which responsibility remains human and institutional. Finally, the paper addresses the question of 'literariness' by arguing that distant literature cannot be grounded solely in interpretive activity: it also depends on formal-aesthetic constraints, textual opacity, and framing practices that make a work recognizable as literature. To illustrate these tensions, the paper presents 'The Barthes-Eco Simulation' – an AI-generated dialogue staging an imagined encounter between Barthes and Eco, revealing how distant literature foregrounds co-authorship, interpretive agency, and the renewed need to theorize enunciation and literariness under generative conditions.

*Like in old hypertextual experiments, the boundaries
between author, reader, and text become more fluid, as readers participate in
determining which narrative possibilities are actualised in their experience.*

Luciano Floridi

*The absence of the Author [...] is not only a historical fact or an act
of writing: it utterly transforms the modern text.*

Roland Barthes

*In a communicative process there are a sender, a message, and an addressee.
Frequently, both sender and addressee are grammatically manifested
by the message: "I tell you that...."*

Umberto Eco

1. Introduction

The rise of large language models (LLMs) has not simply transformed how we produce and consume texts; it is now reshaping the very foundations of literature itself.[1] At the center of this disruption stands what Luciano Floridi (2025) has recently termed 'distant writing' – a concept that extends Franco Moretti's (2000, 2013) influential idea of distant reading beyond literary analysis into the domain of textual creation. Where Moretti encouraged critics to zoom out from the single close-read text to the macro-patterns visible in vast corpora, Floridi inverts this logic: computation here becomes not only interpretative but generative. In this model, the human author no longer writes line by line but instead designs narrative constraints, orchestrating LLMs to produce variations within an ever-expanding modal space of possibilities. In Floridi's own terms, writing becomes 'wrAIting' – a telling coinage that signals not just technological augmentation but a fundamental decoupling of authorship from execution. Yet the consequences of distant writing extend far beyond the realm of literary theory: they compel us to ask what happens to literature – understood as the shared body of texts that shape our cultural imagination – when its production is increasingly delegated to non-human systems. What does it mean for the idea of the author when machines generate pages of plausible prose? What becomes of the reader when the boundary between original and recombined text dissolves? To explore these questions, this paper

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[1] I chose to focus specifically on literature in this paper because literature, broadly understood as the set of works entrusted to writing, has always occupied a privileged position in debates about authorship, interpretation, and meaning. By situating Floridi's idea of distant writing alongside Barthes' radical decentering of the author and Eco's open work and model reader, I wanted to show how the unique tensions that have long defined literary theory can help us grasp the cultural, epistemic, and pedagogical stakes of LLM-assisted textual production today. Literature remains, in my view, an exemplary field for testing how human creativity, technological mediation, and critical reading must be rethought together.

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reframes Floridi's concept through Roland Barthes' (1967) iconic essay on the 'death of the author,' reading it not merely as a theoretical provocation but as a profound metaphor for the reconfiguration of intention, authority, and originality. Alongside Barthes, I draw on Umberto Eco's (1962, 1979) theory of the 'open work' and his figure of the 'model reader,' whose interpretive labor turns the unfinished text into meaningful literature. Building on these foundations, I propose 'distant literature': a paradigm in which literature is not simply written but co-designed, iteratively generated, and critically completed through an interplay between human designers, LLMs, and active readers. In this model, the author is recast as a meta-designer of narrative possibilities, while the reader emerges not as a passive consumer but as a co-author in practice, navigating the isotropic narrative spaces that Floridi describes.

However, this new paradigm also demands conceptual discipline. Terms like 'co-authorship' and 'machine agency' can illuminate the redistribution of textual labor, yet they can also obscure a central issue: enunciation is not merely textual production but a position of responsibility and intention. If we speak too quickly of 'machine enunciation,' we risk naturalizing a metaphor that blurs the distinction between generating strings of text and occupying an enunciative stance. This paper, therefore, explicitly clarifies the status of artificial intelligence (AI) in distant literature: not as an intentional co-enunciator, but as an operator or medium whose outputs produce enunciative effects that must be attributed, evaluated, and ethically governed by human and institutional actors. A second clarification concerns 'literariness.' Distant literature is often described in terms of reader activity: the reader becomes a navigator, curator, and critic. Yet if literariness is reduced to interpretive play alone, the aesthetic and formal specificity of literature risks dissolving into mere critical exploitability. This paper, therefore, argues that distant literature must also be grounded in constraints and features that make a work specifically literary: formal devices, strategic opacity, self-reflexive organization, and framing practices that distinguish literary texts from other kinds of fluent discourse. To make this abstract framework tangible, I present an original experiment – 'The Barthes-Eco Simulation' – in which an LLM (ChatGPT) is prompted to generate an imagined dialogue between Barthes and Eco. The simulation stages an impossible but conceptually coherent encounter, not as novelty, but as a concrete example of how distant literature brings theoretical tensions to life: between authorial death and distributed production, between openness and coherence, between simulated voice and enunciative responsibility, and between interpretive agency and literariness.

If, as Floridi argues, distant writing transforms the author into a designer of constraints, then distant literature transforms the literary field itself into an open work – perpetually unfinished, perpetually re-authored by its readers. But what new literacies does this demand of us? How do we as critics, students, and cultural participants guard against epistemic flattening and algorithmic bias while embracing expanded

creative possibility? These are urgent challenges for literature's future in what Floridi (2014) calls the fourth revolution – a time when humans are displaced not only from the center of knowledge but from the center of the infosphere itself. By weaving together Floridi's distant writing, Barthes' authorial death, Eco's open work, and a generative experiment, this paper charts what a reflective, critical, and formally attentive vision of literature might look like in the current AI era.

2. From distant reading to distant writing

To fully grasp the disruptive force of distant writing, it is necessary to revisit its intellectual genealogy and the broader methodological shift it signals for the study and future of literature. Moretti's (2000) provocation in *Conjectures on World Literature* and his subsequent *Graphs*, *Maps*, *Trees* (2005) fundamentally unsettled the supremacy of close reading by insisting that literary studies must scale up to match the planetary scope of world literature itself. Instead of scrutinizing isolated canonical texts for hidden meanings – the hallmark of New Criticism (Brooks 1947) and its structuralist heirs – distant reading turned literary analysis outward, toward patterns, genres, and networks visible only when vast corpora are computationally aggregated. As Moretti stated, "distance […] is a condition of knowledge" (Moretti 2013: 48). This reorientation aligned naturally with the rise of corpus linguistics (Sinclair 1991; Biber et al 1998), stylometry (Burrows 2002), and the cultural analytics described by Lev Manovich (2017). In this sense, distant reading did not abolish close reading but complemented it – extending literary analysis from the micro to the macro level, from singular meaning to statistical structure.

Floridi's (2025) concept of distant writing, however, marks a profound inversion of this logic. Where distant reading uses computation to interpret what already exists, distant writing uses computation to generate what could exist – to explore the modal space of possible narratives rather than simply mapping the patterns of actual ones. In his formulation, distant writing "positions the author not as the direct textual producer, but as the architect of narrative possibilities" (Floridi 2025: 2). This subtle but radical shift locates writing within the logic of design. Herbert Simon (1969) famously defined design as the science of transforming existing situations into preferred ones, emphasizing that the designer's role is one of orchestration rather than direct execution – a principle that Floridi extends to literary production. The novelty lies in how LLMs operationalize this logic. As combinatorial engines trained on vast literary archives, they unlock a narrative space that Marie-Laure Ryan (2006) and Lubomír Doležel (1998) describe as a universe of possible worlds: the literary text is no longer bound to a single linear trajectory, limited by the writer's memory or style, but becomes an isotropic field where countless variations coexist in potentia. Floridi underscores this with his idea of isotropy – "the principle that any narrative domain is equally workable in any direction, provided coherence

is maintained" (Floridi 2025: 4). The philosophical resonance with modal logic (Lewis 1986) is unmistakable: narrative becomes a lattice of possible worlds, selected, shaped, and curated by the meta-author through iterative prompt design.

In the current era of AI, it seems that the role of the writer is shifting from direct inscription to the combinatorial design of generative permutations. The LLM, in this sense, is not merely a tool but a semi-autonomous operator that expands the space of compositional variation far beyond what solitary human cognition could achieve unaided. Distant writing thus moves us from an artisanal model of authorship to one resembling computational design – reflecting trends in architecture (Pye 1968), algorithmic composition in music (Cope 2004), or even generative possibilities in digital art. Floridi's broader argument about the cleaving power of digital innovation (Floridi 2014) clarifies why this shift matters for literature. The same digital mediation that separates personal data from personal identity (Zuboff 2019) or law from territoriality also disentangles the literary designer from the literary executor. Writing – long celebrated as an intimate extension of human thought and selfhood (Ong 1982) – is refigured as a negotiated process between human intentionality and statistical patterning.

This raises an urgent question for literature's future: if the act of producing new texts is partially delegated to non-human systems, what remains the distinct labor of human authorship – and what happens to the meaning of reading itself? If the writer becomes a meta-author, must the reader, too, evolve into a meta-reader – one who navigates, critiques, and co-completes texts within this isotropic narrative space? These questions push us to see distant writing's genealogy not as ending with distant reading but as opening onto distant literature – a rethinking of how literature is written, remixed, and interpreted when the author function is no longer anchored solely in human intention but, as Michel Foucault puts it, implies "an action that is always testing the limits of its regularity, transgressing and reversing an order that it accepts and manipulates" (Foucault 1977: 116). It is precisely this redistribution of roles that demands a more rigorous clarification of enunciation and literariness, to which the next sections turn.

3. Machine enunciation, intentionality, and enunciative responsibility

The language of 'co-authorship' and 'human–machine collaboration' has become almost unavoidable when describing LLM-mediated writing. Yet from a semiotic perspective, the crucial issue is not simply who produces text, but who (if anyone) enunciates it. Enunciation, in a classical sense, is not reducible to inscription: it presupposes a position in discourse, a stance that organizes deixis ('I / you / here / now'), modality, and commitment (Benveniste 1970; Ducrot 1984). Even when a text is fictional, enunciation establishes an orientation of responsibility, whether attributed

to an author, a narrator, or a constructed voice (Maingueneau 2004). For this reason, to speak of machine enunciation without qualification risks conflating production with a discursive act that – traditionally – implies intention and accountability (Austin 1962; Searle 1969).

To clarify the point, it is useful to distinguish three layers that are too often collapsed: (a) textual generation, (b) enunciative effects (the appearance of voice, stance, address, commitment), and (c) enunciative responsibility (who can answer for the text's claims, harms, or commitments). LLMs obviously perform (a), and they reliably produce (b): they simulate the surface markers of an enunciating subject, including deixis and modality, by recombining learned regularities (Bender et al 2021; Floridi 2025). But (c) cannot be simply attributed to the system, because the pragmatic force of discourse – promising, accusing, asserting, retracting – presupposes accountable uptake and intentional commitment in a communicative situation (Austin 1962; Searle 1969). The model does not 'mean' in the way an enunciator means; it does not commit to truth, promise, or accusation; it cannot be held accountable in the pragmatic and ethical sense in which discourse is typically regulated. The apparent 'I' of an LLM's utterance is therefore best described not as an agentive subject but as a simulated enunciative position – a textual effect produced by patterning, trained on prior uses of enunciative markers. This is why distant literature must be careful: if we treat the model as a co-enunciator, we risk naturalizing responsibility away from the humans and institutions that design prompts, choose outputs, deploy systems, and authorize publication. This does not mean that AI is merely a neutral channel. Floridi's notion of the dataprint (2025) already points toward a more accurate characterization: the model functions as an operator whose outputs bear the imprint of training distributions, curation decisions, and latent cultural asymmetries. If the model lacks intention, it nonetheless organizes probability, and probability is never innocent when it shapes what can be said, what is likely to be said, and what will appear 'natural' in language. The proper question, then, is not whether the machine 'intends,' but how its statistical operation reconfigures the ecology of enunciation by producing texts that look enunciated, and by inviting readers to attribute voice and responsibility where none exists intrinsically.

Indeed, for distant literature, this suggests a precise triadic model:

i. The meta-author (human) designs constraints, selects prompts, curates outputs, and thus establishes the horizon of possible utterances. This is a design-activity, but it is also an ethical and discursive positioning, because it shapes what can appear as voice.

ii. The model (LLM) operates as a generative medium: it produces sequences that simulate enunciative stance without owning commitment.

iii. The reader and the interpretive community attribute, contest, and stabilize responsibility: they decide whether to treat an utterance as literary play, rhetorical claim, or cultural harm; they evaluate the legitimacy of the voices simulated; they determine whether a text is to be received as literature, misinformation, parody, or plagiarism.

In this framework, it becomes clearer why the metaphor of 'co-enunciation' is dangerous if left unchecked. It is acceptable only when explicitly understood as shorthand for a redistributed production process rather than as a literal claim about machine intention. The LLM participates in production, but enunciative responsibility remains human and institutional: with the meta-author who curates and publishes, and with the socio-technical environment that deploys and legitimizes the system. This clarification strengthens, rather than weakens, the connection to Barthes and Eco. Barthes' death of the author was never an invitation to abolish responsibility; it was an attack on interpretive tyranny and the fetish of origin. In the age of LLMs, the risk reverses: not the tyranny of the Author-God, but the disappearance of accountable authorship into an apparently autonomous machine voice. A critical theory of distant literature must therefore hold two claims together: (i) meaning is not guaranteed by authorial intention; and yet (ii) responsibility for discourse cannot simply evaporate into automation. Eco's model reader, in this context, becomes not only an interpreter of openness but also a diagnostician of simulated enunciation: a reader trained to ask what kind of voice is being staged, by whom, under what constraints, and with what consequences.

4. The death of the author and the rebirth of the reader

Barthes' brief yet seismic essay "La mort de l'auteur" (1967) has been debated and reinterpreted for decades, yet its radical core remains vital to understanding literature today. Its enduring provocation is that the writer's personal authority over the text must be dissolved if language – and by extension, literature itself – is to remain alive. For Barthes, this break was not only theoretical but deeply ideological: a deliberate assault on the inherited privilege of the Author-God.[2] As he writes: "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). In place of this closure, Barthes invites us to see writing as "that neutral, composite, oblique space where our subject slips away, the negative where all identity is lost" (Barthes 1977: 142). Literature's meaning does not originate in the private intentions of the writer but emerges in the dynamic encounter between text and reader. Or as Barthes famously puts it: "A text's unity lies not in its origin but in its destination" (Barthes 1977: 148).

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[2] Barthes capitalizes Author to mark it not as a neutral descriptive term (a person who writes) but as an ideological figure – a cultural institution that functions like a quasi-transcendent source of meaning, what he elsewhere calls the Author-God.

This shift – from the sovereign Author to the interpretive reader – finds renewed urgency in the age of AI. If the modern author is already dethroned, what happens when the very act of writing is partly automated by LLMs trained on vast archives of human language? Barthes' death of the author anticipated a dispersal of origin; generative AI literalizes that dispersal by multiplying plausible textual surfaces. But the conceptual clarification from the previous section matters here: the machine's fluency is not an enunciative subject; it is a simulation of voice that the reader is invited to take as meaningful. One might paraphrase Barthes today and say: to give a text an author is to close it; to give it an LLM is to proliferate it – yet only a critical reader can decide which proliferations deserve meaning, and which simply mimic the appearance of sense. Foucault's "What Is an Author?" (1969) complements Barthes by asking not only who writes but what social functions the author performs. For Foucault, the 'author-function' is a way of organizing discourse: it anchors responsibility, authenticity, and the circulation of meaning within a culture. In distant literature, the author-function persists but is redistributed: the meta-author designs constraints; the model generates; the institution frames and circulates; the reader stabilizes meaning and judges legitimacy. In an educational context, this redistribution reshapes the roles of critics and teachers. If literature becomes increasingly recombinant and generative, then the task is not to defend fixed interpretations but to cultivate conditions for interpretive rigor: the capacity to navigate plurality without surrendering to triviality. This is where Paulo Freire's (1970) insight remains relevant. Long before AI, Freire denounced the 'banking model' of knowledge – the idea that meaning could be deposited into passive minds. Instead, he insisted that knowledge must be co-authored through active, critical engagement. In distant literature, co-authorship is no longer merely metaphorical: the reader must actively prompt, refine, interpret, and question machine-generated text. Yet the stakes are not purely technical. In a landscape where LLMs can flood the field with plausible pastiche, the danger is no longer interpretive tyranny but interpretive triviality: the replacement of creative ambiguity with an infinite scroll of statistically probable variations. The reader's new role is not just to complete the text but to judge which branches merit meaning and which do not. Here, literature's survival as a meaningful cultural practice depends on what Eco will illuminate next: openness is not chaos, but a designed field of interpretive possibilities that demands both freedom and constraint.

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5. The role of the open reader

If Barthes declared the death of the author to liberate the text from singular author-ity, Eco took the next crucial step by theorizing how texts invite readers to become co-authors in practice. In "The Role of the Reader" (1979), Eco deepens the insight first outlined in *Opera Aperta*[3] (1962): meaning is never fully given but "also coop-eratively generated by the addressee" (Eco 1979: 3). For Eco, an open work does not mean a text without structure or constraint but one that "offers the interpreter, the performer, the addressee a work to be completed" (Eco 1979: 4). This openness is not chaos; it is a carefully designed space for interpretive freedom within coherent boundaries.

This vision feels newly concrete in an era when LLMs can produce endless drafts, paraphrases, and recombinations. In distant literature, the reader is no longer mere-ly a recipient of closed texts but a navigator of generative processes. As Eco writes: "What one calls 'message' is usually a text, that is, a network of different messages depending on different codes and working at different levels of signification" (Eco 1979: 5). When the 'sender' is partly an operator trained on massive archives, the 'code' the reader must share is not only cultural and linguistic; it includes a critical awareness of how generative systems stage voice, stance, and authority. Readers must learn to detect the dataprint Floridi (2025) describes: the traces of training dis-tributions, stylistic smoothing, and the gravitational pull of the probable. Eco's model reader thus becomes, in the context of LLMs, a kind of meta-reader: one able to navi-gate drafts, detect statistical seams, and decide when coherence holds or breaks. This is not a trivial literacy: it spans genre knowledge, intertextual awareness, prompt logic, and ethical reflection on simulated enunciation. Eco also anticipated the collec-tive dimension of interpretive work. In his analysis of experimental forms, he shows that the open work "is a field of relations endowed with a structural resilience much greater than the apparent casualness of its surface might suggest" (Eco 1979: 12). Dis-tant literature expands this field into a combinatorial network of cultural, historical, and computational traces that demand collaborative decoding.

Yet an important limit must be maintained. Openness is not the same as the dis-appearance of literariness, nor does the reader's activity alone guarantee that what is generated becomes literature. The next section, therefore, addresses a question that becomes unavoidable once generativity scales: if the reader's interpretive labor is central, what still grounds the specifically literary character of a text?

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[3] Originally published in Italian as *Opera aperta* (1962), Eco's influential book was later translated into English as The *Open Work* (1989), shaping semiotic and literary debates on indeterminacy and reader participation.

6. Literariness in the age of distant literature

A theory of distant literature cannot rely exclusively on the expansion of readerly agency. If literariness is reduced to interpretive play or meta-critical decoding alone, the specificity of literature risks dissolving into the mere fact that a reader can do something interesting with a text (Culler 1975; Eagleton 1983). This risk is amplified by LLMs, which can produce fluent discourse in almost any register: under such conditions, literariness cannot simply mean 'a text that invites interpretation,' because almost any generated text can invite some form of interpretation (Iser 1978; Eco 1979). What is at stake, then, is not the availability of interpretation, but the conditions under which a text becomes aesthetically and formally worthy of sustained literary attention (Barthes 1970; Jauss 1982).

To insist on literariness is therefore to insist on constraints – not only ethical constraints on generation, but formal-aesthetic constraints that distinguish literary discourse from other kinds of communicative output (Jakobson 1960). In classical terms, one might recall that literariness has often been linked to features such as formal organization, self-reflexivity, patterned language, strategic ambiguity, defamiliarization, and a certain opacity that resists immediate paraphrase. None of these features is automatically produced by an LLM, even if the model can imitate their surface. The literary is not identical with the merely plausible. In distant literature, literariness can be conceptualized as emerging from at least three interacting layers:

(i) *Designed form* (constraint as poetics). If distant writing transforms the author into a designer of constraints, then literariness must be understood, in part, as a designed poetics: the deliberate engineering of voice, focalization, rhythm, limitation, and structural pattern (Floridi 2025). A prompt that merely asks for 'a story' tends to yield generic fluency; a prompt that specifies narratological architecture, stylistic restrictions, or compositional rules pushes generation toward literary specificity by binding the probabilistic system to a formal project (Simon 1969; Ryan 2006). In this sense, the meta-author's work is not only conceptual but aesthetic: constraint-design becomes a contemporary site of poetics (Jakobson 1960; Floridi 2025).

(ii) *Textual resistance* (opacity and surplus). Literature has often been recognized by its capacity to exceed immediate communicative function – by generating interpretive surplus, ambiguity, and a resistant texture that cannot be exhausted by summary (Barthes 1970; Ricoeur 1976). Under generative conditions, this becomes a diagnostic criterion: does the text merely simulate the appearance of literary devices, or does it produce a sustained organization of language that rewards re-reading, sustains tension, and resists closure in a non-trivial way (Iser 1978; Eco 1979)? The model reader's task is not only to interpret but to test whether the text's openness is structurally meaningful or merely the looseness of generic output (Eco

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1979). Put differently, literariness requires material that can withstand interpretive pressure without collapsing into paraphrase or generic coherence (Barthes 1970; Ricoeur 1976).

(iii) *Framing and institution* (what counts as literature). Literariness is also a cultural function: it depends on paratexts, publication contexts, genre labeling, and the interpretive community that stabilizes a work as literature (Genette 1987; Bourdieu 1993). In distant literature, this framing becomes even more visible: the disclosure that a dialogue is simulated, the articulation of constraints, and the positioning of a text as an experiment or artifact all shape how it is read and valued (Jauss 1982; Genette 1987). This does not reduce literature to sociology; it clarifies that literariness is always negotiated between textual features and cultural institutions (Culler 1975; Bourdieu 1993). Under LLM conditions, framing is also an ethical gesture because it prevents the reader from mistaking simulated enunciation for accountable voice (Foucault 1969; Noble 2018).

These layers reconfigure, rather than erase, the question of aesthetic value. If LLMs can generate infinite outputs, scarcity shifts from production to selection: what matters is not that text can be generated, but that certain texts can be shaped into forms that sustain literary attention. This is also why literariness cannot be reduced to reader activity alone. The reader can complete an open work, but cannot conjure literariness out of pure genericness without some resistant material to work on. Distant literature, therefore, demands a double discipline: the reader must become more active, and the meta-author must become more formally intentional, designing constraints that produce more than smooth discourse.

With these clarifications in place – about machine enunciation and about literariness – we can now talk about methodology. The point of the following experiment is not to claim that an LLM 'speaks' as Barthes or Eco, but to stage, under controlled constraints, the tension between simulated voice and interpretive responsibility, and to test what kinds of formal choices make the output more than mere fluent pastiche.

7. The methodology of distant literature

Before turning to a concrete experiment that illustrates distant literature in action, it is helpful to clarify visually how the core concepts explored so far – Floridi's distant writing, Barthes' death of the author, Eco's open work and model reader, and the two problematizations developed above (enunciation and literariness) – interlock to shape this emerging paradigm. To this end, I propose a conceptual figure (see Fig. 1) designed as a triangular diagram: at each corner sits one of the three anchoring ideas.
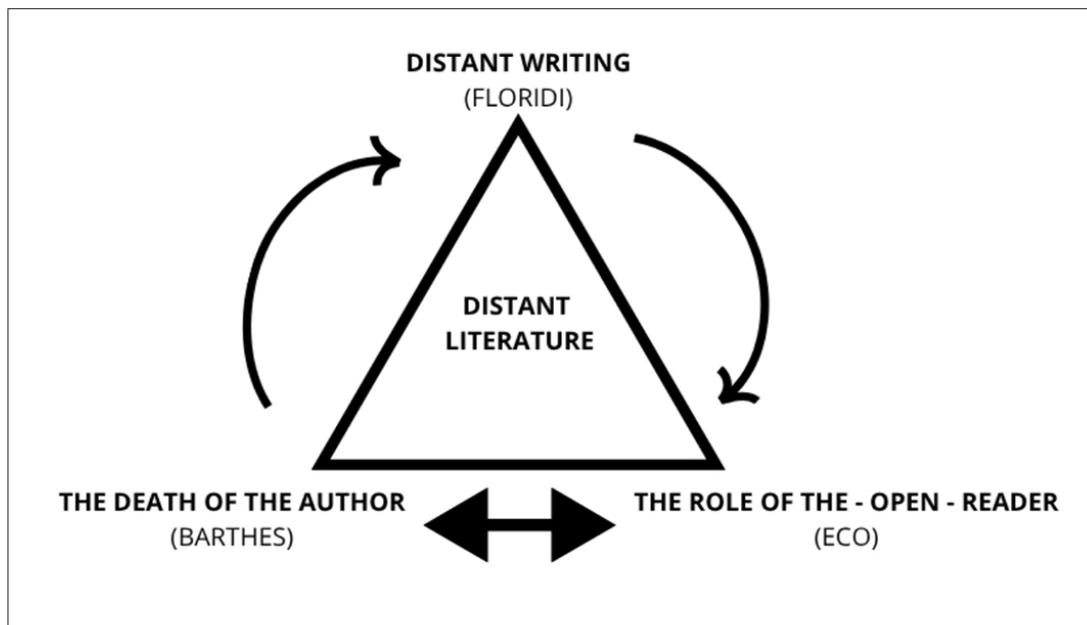
Figure 1. The distant literature triangle

The top corner shows distant writing (Floridi) – representing the author's shift from being a direct producer to a meta-designer of narrative constraints. The left corner is the death of the author (Barthes) – signifying the decentering of authorial intention as a privileged source of meaning. The right corner is the reader's role (Eco), illustrating the expansion of interpretive agency and the model reader who completes and activates meaning in practice. At the center of this triad sits distant literature itself – shown as an open, iterative field that loops meta-authors, generative systems, and active readers into a co-creative circuit. Arrows indicate how the writer shifts to a meta-author, the text expands from closed to open, and the reader evolves from a passive recipient to a critical co-designer. Methodologically, Floridi's (2025) distant writing already offers a blueprint. The meta-author does not simply prompt an LLM once; rather, they iteratively design, refine, and curate, choosing prompts that generate variations, testing coherence, and steering the output toward a meaningful arc. The intellectual labor is not the keystroke but the orchestration – knowing how to engineer constraints, and how to assess which generated paths hold together as literature and which dissolve into noise. However, the conceptual clarifications above refine the meaning of 'assessment.' The meta-author must evaluate not only coherence but also the status of the simulated voice (what enunciative stance is being staged, and what responsibilities might be mistaken for belonging to the machine). Likewise, the reader or critic must evaluate not only interpretive openness but literariness: whether the output sustains formal and aesthetic attention beyond the mere fact that it can be decoded.

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To ground these principles, this paper presents a practical micro-experiment called The Barthes-Eco Simulation, co-produced with a contemporary LLM (ChatGPT). The experiment simulates a dialogue that has never occurred historically but is conceptually plausible: an imagined conversation in which Barthes revisits his 'death of the author,' and Eco responds from the standpoint of the open work and the model reader. The human role – my role – is not to claim authorial identity over their voices, but to stage constraints, iterate outputs, and curate a version that makes the theoretical tensions legible.

8. A simulation of distant literature: The Barthes-Eco dialogue

The following simulation was created with ChatGPT-5,[4] using the chatbot as both tool and method: an artificial dialogue that never occurred historically but is textually plausible because it draws on rhetorical habits and conceptual tensions found in the works of Barthes and Eco. In designing this experiment, my role as meta-author mirrored Floridi's (2025) distant writing process: I crafted constraints to position the LLM as a simulator of Barthes' aphoristic provocations and Eco's semiotic nuance, iteratively refined prompts, tested multiple outputs, and selected a final version that preserves thematic coherence. Two caveats are essential. First, the simulation does not assert that the LLM 'enunciates' as Barthes or Eco; it stages simulated enunciative positions that must be read as effects, not as intentions. Second, the point is not merely to generate fluent pastiche, but to create a text that can be tested for literariness: does it sustain tension, conceptual friction, and interpretive surplus, or does it merely smooth over differences into generic coherence? The dialogue is therefore presented without commentary, inviting the reader(s) to perform precisely the role Eco envisioned: completing an open work by testing how well the simulation sustains conceptual and formal demands.

8.1. The Barthes-Eco Simulation

> **Barthes:** To declare the author dead was to free the text from tyranny. When I wrote that the birth of the reader must be at the cost of the death of the author, I hoped to remind us that writing is not an emanation from some sacred origin but a tissue of quotations, drawn from innumerable centers of culture.

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[4] The simulation was designed using a series of carefully structured prompts tested in multiple rounds. These included instructions to imitate Barthes' tone and Eco's precision, while explicitly referencing key concepts like the death of the author, the model reader, and open work. Each output was refined through iterative prompting to maintain thematic coherence and rhetorical plausibility. It is also important to keep in mind that each response given by ChatGPT is always different from the one it generates the first time, even if the prompt remains unchanged.

Eco: Yes, Roland, but even your tissue needs to be read. I have always insisted that a work's openness is never infinite. In The Role of the Reader, I wrote that "the message is a form which must be actualized by the addressee," and that actualization depends on the codes the reader knows how to use.

Barthes: True, and yet now we have these machines – these algorithmic scribes that produce endless text. They multiply the tissue without limit. What then of the author? Do I die again? Or does the machine die in my place?

Eco: The machine neither lives nor dies. It writes without intention. It imitates the gesture of authorship but leaves the work unfinished. It is the reader who must decide where meaning coheres and where it dissolves. The machine's output is only open because we decide how to close it.

Barthes: Then the reader must grow more vigilant. If every text is a remix, now the remix is automated. We risk mistaking fluency for meaning, coherence for truth.

Eco: Which is why, as I have argued, the model reader is not passive but interpretively active. The model reader reconstructs the logic behind the sign, tests the text's coherence, and resists closure that is too simple.

Barthes: So, the critic of the future is not the guardian of truth but the designer of conditions under which the reader can interpret well.

Eco: Precisely. The teacher – or rather, the guide – must help the reader become what I called the addressee capable of filling in the blanks – or rather, discerning which blanks to fill and which to leave open.

This brief simulation is not offered as a perfect imitation of Barthes' or Eco's style – indeed, its slight anachronisms and rhetorical smoothness are part of its diagnostic value. Rather, it illustrates what Floridi (2025) identifies as the methodological core of distant writing: design, iterative refinement, and careful curation as the intellectual labor behind machine-generated text. What makes this not merely a curiosity but a model for distant literature in practice is how it can be used to test both conceptual and aesthetic dimensions. Readers can be asked: Where does the dialogue echo passages from "The Death of the Author" or *Opera Aperta/The Role of the Reader?* Where does it flatten or distort? Does the simulation preserve conceptual disagreement, or does it dissolve conflict into agreeable coherence? And crucially: does the text generate interpretive surplus, or merely the appearance of depth?

Furthermore, this experiment can be extended. Readers might design their own simulations – pairing Plato with Foucault, or staging an imagined interview in which Floridi confronts Barthes and Eco about isotropy and openness. Such exercises cultivate not only prompt design – an emerging literary craft in its own right (Liu et al 2023) – but also deepen close reading, because readers must ground generative experiments

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in real theoretical texts and in formal constraints that test literariness rather than mere fluency. The Barthes-Eco Simulation thus exemplifies how distant literature transforms the text into an open work in Eco's strongest sense: not merely indeterminate but deliberately unfinished, demanding interpretive vigilance and ethical critique. Recalling Eco's caution that "an open text, however 'open' it be, cannot afford whatever interpretation" (Eco 1979: 9), the simulation invites readers to test where meaning holds and where it fails – without confusing simulated enunciation with intention, and without confusing interpretive possibility with literariness as such.

9. Challenges, risks, and the ethical horizon of distant literature

The simulation illustrates how distant literature can serve as a groundwork for new forms of textual experimentation – but it also exposes unresolved tensions and ethical challenges. To engage Floridi's (2025) vision of distant writing without sliding into technological determinism, we must reckon with both the promise and pitfalls of delegating textual execution to statistical machines. One risk is that the liberation from authorial tyranny Barthes championed can be recaptured by the invisible authority of algorithmic probability. The model has no intention, yet its outputs are never neutral. As Bender et al. (2021) remind us, LLMs reiterate biases embedded in training data, mask assumptions behind rhetorical fluency, and can replicate misinformation as smoothly as they reproduce canonical style. The data print described by Floridi (2025) is not merely stylistic; it is a site where cultural and epistemic asymmetries may be reproduced under the guise of automated originality.

This is why distant literature cannot be reduced to technical prompt engineering. Readers, teachers, students, and critics must develop a form of algorithmic literacy: the capacity to see how generative systems shape knowledge, and how those systems are shaped by data curation, training regimes, and profit logics (Noble 2018). If the meta-author's role is to design narrative affordances, part of that labor must include making the system's blind spots visible – foregrounding the politics behind the apparent neutrality of generative output. In line with Freire's (1970) assertion that education is never neutral, distant literature must keep open questions of power: who benefits from automated authorship, and who is erased? The question of enunciative responsibility returns here with force. If we naturalize machine enunciation, we risk displacing accountability: as if harm were authored by an autonomous voice. But in practice, responsibility is distributed across human choices – prompt design, selection, editing, and publication – and across institutions that authorize the system's use. A critical distant literature must therefore combine Barthes' suspicion of authorial origin with an explicit insistence that discursive responsibility does not vanish simply because generation is automated.

There is also the thorny question of labor and attribution. Who deserves credit for a text produced partly by a human designer and partly by a model trained on vast archives of human writing? Floridi (2025) poses this sharply: does the meta-author 'who established the requirements' remain the true author, or is authorship distributed across a network that includes unknown writers whose works seeded the model's capacities? This echoes debates about remix culture (Lessig 2009), but here the remix is automated and scaled beyond any single human's capacity to remember. In criticism and the classroom alike, this raises urgent questions about originality, citation, and what counts as authentic work. Let's take a real example: if a student produces an essay by skillfully prompting an LLM, is the essay 'theirs'? Or is the intellectual labor the design of constraints and the critical curation of outputs? Traditional rubrics must adapt if they are to remain relevant to the conditions of distant literature. Equally urgent is the risk that distant writing and distant literature deepen the digital divide. As Virginia Eubanks (2018) warns, technological affordances rarely distribute power equally. Access to advanced LLMs, training in constraint design, and the literacy to question machine-generated text are already unevenly distributed across schools, regions, and social contexts. Without explicit strategies to democratize these literacies, the meta-author and meta-reader roles Floridi imagines may become privileges of an elite, while others remain passive consumers of machine text, and they have no tools to decode or contest. Finally, there is the oldest challenge of all: what happens to thought itself when the hand that writes no longer directly inscribes the word? From Plato's suspicion of writing in *Phaedrus*[5] to Walter Ong's (1982) exploration of how literacy reshapes consciousness, thinkers have long recognized that writing technologies change not only what we know but how we know. Ong's warning remains striking: "Once the word is technologized, there is no effective way to criticize what technology has done with it without the aid of the highest technology available" (Ong 1982: 79). Floridi's (2025) provocation – "What happens when we think through *wrAIting*?" – reframes this ancient worry for the age of automated prose. If design replaces execution, do we risk losing the meditative labor that makes writing a mode of thought, not merely output? Do we trade the creative friction of the blank page for the false fluency of infinite drafts?

None of these tensions means distant writing – or distant literature – should be rejected. Quite the opposite: they reveal why the paradigm must be critically embraced. If today the author is dead, the reader must be more alive than ever: vigilant,

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[5] In *Phaedrus*, Plato (via Socrates) famously criticized writing as something 'technology' that weakens memory and internal thought, a worry that echoes surprisingly in contemporary debates on AI-assisted authorship.

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literate in systems, sensitive to form, and ready to test what emerges from the iso-tropic narrative space Floridi describes. The classroom, the reading community, the public sphere – each must become what Eco once called a field of presence (Eco 1979): a shared space where machine-generated text is continuously examined, cri-tiqued, and re-stitched by readers who know that the death of the author is mean-ingful only if it gives birth to a richer, more responsible, and more aesthetically demanding life for the reader.

10. Conclusion

Distant writing, as Floridi (2025) theorizes, transforms authorship from a solitary craft into a design practice: the writer becomes a meta-author, a conductor of genera-tive engines, a sculptor of narrative constraints within an isotropic possibility space. When mapped onto the literary field as a whole, this transformation reanimates Bar-thes' (1967) death of the author and Eco's (1979) open work, reframing literature as a collaborative space where authorial authority dissolves and interpretive agency expands. But the two problematizations developed in this paper refine what distant literature can responsibly claim. First, the metaphor of machine enunciation must be handled with rigor. LLMs generate text and simulate voice, but they do not occupy intention in the sense required for enunciative responsibility. The proper conceptual move is not to enthrone the machine as co-enunciator, but to recognize a redistribut-ed ecology of production: human constraint-design, model operation, institutional framing, and readerly attribution. Second, literariness cannot be grounded solely in the reader's activity. Distant literature demands an expanded model reader, but it also demands designed poetics, textual resistance, and framing practices that dis-tinguish literature from mere fluent discourse. The Barthes-Eco Simulation offered here is a prototype for this practice. It shows how readers can prompt, refine, and critique simulated dialogues, staging impossible encounters that sharpen theoreti-cal grasp while testing the limits of simulated voice and formal-literary coherence. The lesson is not the text alone but the labor it demands: reading not only what the model outputs, but how it stages enunciation, how it distributes responsibility, and whether the resulting form earns literary attention. If, as Floridi (2014) argues, the fourth revolution displaces humans from the center of the infosphere, then literature must ensure we do not surrender what remains distinctly ours: the responsibility to interpret, to judge, to design constraints, and to sustain literariness as a practice of form and attention. In this, the death of the author is not an ending but an opening: the beginning of literature as an open work, alive with the unfinished labor of mean-ing-making – work that no machine can complete for us.

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