

The Death of the Author

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Roland Barthes

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In his story *Sarrasine*, Balzac, speaking of a castrato disguised as a woman, writes this sentence: “It was Woman, with her sudden fears, her irrational whims, her instinctive fears, her unprovoked bravado, her daring and her delicious delicacy of feeling” Who is speaking in this way? Is it the story’s hero, concerned to ignore the castrato concealed beneath the woman? Is it the man Balzac, endowed by his personal experience with a philosophy of Woman? Is it the author Balzac, professing certain “literary” ideas of femininity? Is it universal wisdom? or romantic psychology? It will always be impossible to know, for the good reason that all writing is itself this special voice, consisting of several indiscernible voices, and that literature is precisely the invention of this voice, to which we cannot assign a specific origin: literature is that neuter, that composite, that oblique into which every subject escapes, the trap where all identity is lost, beginning with the very identity of the body that writes.

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Probably this has always been the case: once an action is recounted, for intransitive ends, and no longer in order to act directly upon reality — that is, finally external to any function but the very exercise of the symbol — this disjunction occurs, the voice loses its origin, the author enters his own death, writing begins. Nevertheless, the feeling about this phenomenon has been variable; in primitive societies, narrative is never undertaken by a person, but by a mediator, shaman or speaker, whose “performance” may be admired (that is, his mastery of the narrative code), but not his “genius” The author is a modern figure, produced no doubt by our society insofar as, at the end of the middle ages, with English empiricism, French rationalism and the personal faith of the Reformation, it discovered the prestige of the individual, or, to put it more nobly, of the “human person” Hence it is logical that with regard to literature it should be positivism, resume and the result of capitalist ideology, which has accorded the greatest importance to the author’s “person” The author still rules in manuals of literary history, in biographies of writers, in magazine interviews, and even in the awareness of literary men, anxious to unite, by their private journals, their person and their work; the image of literature to be found in contemporary culture is tyrannically centered on the author, his person, his history, his tastes, his passions; criticism still consists, most of the time, in saying that Baudelaire’s work is the failure of the man Baudelaire, Van Gogh’s work his madness, Tchaikovsky’s his vice: the explanation of the work is always sought in the man who has produced it, as if, through the more or less transparent allegory of fiction, it was always finally the voice of one and the same person, the author, which delivered his “confidence.”

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Though the Author's empire is still very powerful (recent criticism has often merely consolidated it), it is evident that for a long time now certain writers have attempted to topple it. In France, Mallarme was doubtless the first to see and foresee in its full extent the necessity of substituting language itself for the man who hitherto was supposed to own it; for Mallarme, as for us, it is language which speaks, not the author: to write is to reach, through a preexisting impersonality — never to be confused with the castrating objectivity of the realistic novelist — that point where language alone acts, “performs,” and not “oneself”: Mallarme's entire poetics consists in suppressing the author for the sake of the writing (which is, as we shall see, to restore the status of the reader.) Valery, encumbered with a psychology of the Self, greatlyedulcorated Mallarme's theory, but, turning in a preference for classicism to the lessons of rhetoric, he unceasingly questioned and mocked the Author, emphasized the linguistic and almost “chance” nature of his activity, and throughout his prose works championed the essentially verbal condition of literature, in the face of which any recourse to the writer's inferiority seemed to him pure superstition. It is clear that Proust himself, despite the apparent psychological character of what is called his analyses, undertook the responsibility of inexorably blurring, by an extreme subtilization, the relation of the writer and his characters: by making the narrator not the person who has seen or felt, nor even the person who writes, but the person who will write (the young man of the novel — but, in fact, how old is he, and who is he? — wants to write but cannot, and the novel ends when at last the writing becomes possible), Proust has given modern writing its epic: by a radical reversal, instead of putting his life into his novel, as we say so often, he makes his very life into a work for which his own book was in a sense the model, so that it is quite obvious to us that it is not Charlus who imitates Montesquiou, but that Montesquiou in his anecdotal, historical reality is merely a secondary fragment, derived from Charlus. Surrealism lastly — to remain on the level of this prehistory of modernity — surrealism doubtless could not accord language a sovereign place, since language is a system and since what the movement sought was, romantically, a direct subversion of all codes — an illusory subversion, moreover, for a code cannot be destroyed, it can only be “played with”; but by abruptly violating expected meanings (this was the famous surrealist “jolt”), by entrusting to the hand the responsibility of writing as fast as possible what the head itself ignores (this was automatic writing), by accepting the principle and the experience of a collective writing, surrealism helped secularize the image of the Author. Finally, outside of literature itself (actually, these distinctions are being superseded), linguistics has just furnished the destruction of the Author with a precious analytic instrument by showing that utterance in its entirety is a void process, which functions perfectly without requiring to be filled by the person of the interlocutors: linguistically, the author is never anything more than the man who writes, just as I is no more than the man who says I: language knows a “subject,” not a “person,” end this subject, void outside of the very utterance which defines it, suffices to make language “work,” that is, to exhaust it.

The absence of the Author (with Brecht, we might speak here of a real “alienation:” the Author diminishing like a tiny figure at the far end of the literary stage) is not only a historical fact or an act of writing: it utterly transforms the modern text (or — what is the same thing — the text is henceforth written and read so that in it, on every level, the Author absents himself). Time, first of all, is no longer the same. The Author, when we believe in him, is always conceived as the past of his own book: the book and the author take their places of their own accord on the same line, cast as a before and an after: the Author is supposed to feed the book — that is, he pre-exists it, thinks, suffers, lives for it; he maintains with his work the same relation of antecedence a father maintains with his child. Quite the contrary, the modern writer (scriptor) is born simultaneously with his text; he is in no way supplied with a being which precedes or transcends his writing, he is in no way the subject of which his book is the predicate; there is no other time than that of the utterance, and every text is eternally written here and now. This is because (or: it follows that) to write can no longer designate an operation of recording, of observing, of representing, of “painting” (as the Classic writers put it), but rather what the linguisticians, following the vocabulary of the Oxford school, call a performative, a rare verbal form (exclusively given to the first person and to the present), in which utterance has no other content than the act by which it is uttered: something like the / Command of kings or the I Sing of the early bards; the modern writer, having buried the Author, can therefore no longer believe, according to the “pathos” of his predecessors, that his hand is too slow for his thought or his passion, and that in consequence, making a law out of necessity, he must accentuate this gap and endlessly “elaborate” his form; for him, on the contrary, his hand, detached from any voice, borne by a pure gesture of inscription (and not of expression), traces a field without origin — or which, at least, has no other origin than language itself, that is, the very thing which ceaselessly questions any origin.

We know that a text does not consist of a line of words, releasing a single “theological” meaning (the “message” of the Author-God), but is a space of many dimensions, in which are wedded and contested various kinds of writing, no one of which is original: the text is a tissue of citations, resulting from the thousand sources of culture. Like Bouvard and Pecuchet, those eternal copyists, both sublime and comical and whose profound absurdity precisely designates the truth of writing, the writer can only imitate a gesture forever anterior, never original; his only power is to combine the different kinds of writing, to oppose some by others, so as never to sustain himself by just one of them; if he wants to express himself, at least he should know that the

internal “thing” he claims to “translate” is itself only a readymade dictionary whose words can be explained (defined) only by other words, and so on ad infinitum: an experience which occurred in an exemplary fashion to the young De Quincey, so gifted in Greek that in order to translate into that dead language certain absolutely modern ideas and images, Baudelaire tells us, “he created for it a standing dictionary much more complex and extensive than the one which results from the vulgar patience of purely literary themes” (*Paradis Artificiels*). succeeding the Author, the writer no longer contains within himself passions, humors, sentiments, impressions, but that enormous dictionary, from which he derives a writing which can know no end or halt: life can only imitate the book, and the book itself is only a tissue of signs, a lost, infinitely remote imitation.

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Once the Author is gone, the claim to “decipher” a text becomes quite useless. To give an Author to a text is to impose upon that text a stop clause, to furnish it with a final signification, to close the writing. This conception perfectly suits criticism, which can then take as its major task the discovery of the Author (or his hypostases: society, history, the psyche, freedom) beneath the work: once the Author is discovered, the text is “explained:” the critic has conquered; hence it is scarcely surprising not only that, historically, the reign of the Author should also have been that of the Critic, but that criticism (even “new criticism”) should be overthrown along with the Author. In a multiple writing, indeed, everything is to be distinguished, but nothing deciphered; structure can be followed, “threaded” (like a stocking that has run) in all its recurrences and all its stages, but there is no underlying ground; the space of the writing is to be traversed, not penetrated: writing ceaselessly posits meaning but always in order to evaporate it: it proceeds to a systematic exemption of meaning. Thus literature (it would be better, henceforth, to say writing), by refusing to assign to the text (and to the world as text) a “secret:” that is, an ultimate meaning, liberates an activity which we might call counter-theological, properly revolutionary, for to refuse to arrest meaning is finally to refuse God and his hypostases, reason, science, the law.

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Let us return to Balzac’s sentence: no one (that is, no “person”) utters it: its source, its voice is not to be located; and yet it is perfectly read; this is because the true locus of writing is reading. Another very specific example can make this understood: recent investigations (J. P. Vernant) have shed light upon the constitutively ambiguous nature of Greek tragedy, the text of which is woven with words that have double meanings, each character understanding them unilaterally (this perpetual misunderstanding is

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precisely what is meant by “the tragic”); yet there is someone who understands each word in its duplicity, and understands further, one might say, the very deafness of the characters speaking in front of him: this someone is precisely the reader (or here the spectator). In this way is revealed the whole being of writing: a text consists of multiple writings, issuing from several cultures and entering into dialogue with each other, into parody, into contestation; but there is one place where this multiplicity is collected, united, and this place is not the author, as we have hitherto said it was, but the reader: the reader is the very space in which are inscribed, without any being lost, all the citations a writing consists of; the unity of a text is not in its origin, it is in its destination; but this destination can no longer be personal: the reader is a man without history, without biography, without psychology; he is only that someone who holds gathered into a single field all the paths of which the text is constituted. This is why it is absurd to hear the new writing condemned in the name of a humanism which hypocritically appoints itself the champion of the reader’s rights. The reader has never been the concern of classical criticism; for it, there is no other man in literature but the one who writes. We are now beginning to be the dupes no longer of such antiphrases, by which our society proudly champions precisely what it dismisses, ignores, smothers or destroys; we know that to restore to writing its future, we must reverse its myth: the birth of the reader must be ransomed by the death of the Author.

— *translated by Richard Howard*

ROLAND BARTHES "THE DEATH OF THE AUTHOR"

Barthes opens with a quote from Balzac's novel Sarrasine where the author offers a description of a "castrato disguised as a woman" (142):

This was woman herself, with her sudden fears, her irrational whims, her instinctive worries, her impetuous boldness, her fussings, and her delicious sensibility. (Qts. in Barthes, 142)

Stereotypes aside, Barthes' concern here is with "Who is speaking thus" (142) in the novel: the "hero of the story" (142)? "Balzac the individual, furnished by his personal experience with a philosophy of woman" (142)? "Balzac the author professing 'literary' ideas on femininity" (142)? "Is it universal wisdom" (142)? "We shall never know" (142), he responds for "writing is the destruction of every voice, of every point of origin. Writing is that neutral space . . . where our subject slips away, the negative where all identity is lost" (142). When "writing begins" (142), he argues, the "voice loses its origin, the author enters into his own death" (142).

In other cultures, Barthes claims, the "responsibility for a narrative is never assumed by a person but by a mediator, shaman or relator whose 'performance' – the mastery of the narrative code – may possibly be admired but never his genius" (142). The concept of the author is historically- and culturally-specific, he argues, the product, that is, of a specific historical stage of a particular culture: the early modern period of Western Europe. The notion of the Author is "a modern figure, a product of our society insofar as, emerging from the Middle Ages with English empiricism, French rationalism and the personal faith of the Reformation, it discovered the prestige of the individual, of, as it is more nobly put, the 'human person'" (142-143). It is, he contends, only "logical that in literature it should be this positivism, the epitome and culmination of capitalist ideology, which has attached the greatest importance to the 'person' of the author" (143) who continues to predominate in "histories of literature, biographies of writers, interviews, magazines, . . . in the very consciousness of men of letters anxious to unite their person and their work through diaries and memoirs" (143). The "image of literature to be found in ordinary culture is tyrannically centred on the author, his person, his life, his tastes, his passions" (143). Literary criticism, he argues, still consists for the most part in seeking an "*explanation* of a work . . . in the man or woman who produced it" (143). Such a view is predicated upon the assumption that a literary work is "always in the end, through the more or less transparent allegory of the fiction, the *author* 'confiding' in us" (143).

Many "writers" (143), Barthes argues, "have long since attempted to loosen" (143) the stranglehold of this notion of Authorship. Mallarmé was the

first to . . . foresee in its full extent the necessity to substitute language itself for the person who until then had been supposed to be its owner. For him, . . . it is language which speaks, not the author; to write is, through an prerequisite impersonality (not at all to be confused with the castrating objectivity of the realist novel), to reach the point where only language acts, "performs," and not 'me.' (143)

Valéry, too, "never stopped calling into question and deriding the Author" (144), stressing that "all recourse to the writer's interiority" (144) was "pure superstition" (144). Proust, similarly, by means of a "radical reversal, instead of putting his life into his novel, as is so often maintained, . . . made of his very life a work for which his own book was the model" (144). Likewise, Surrealism "contributed to the desacrilization of the image of the Author . . . by entrusting the hand with the task of writing as quickly as possible what the head itself is unaware of (automatic writing)" (144). Last but not least, linguistics (i.e. Saussure and his heirs) has "recently provided the destruction of the Author with a valuable analytical tool" (145) by showing

whole of the enunciation is an empty process, functioning perfectly without there being any need for it to be filled with the person of the interlocutors. Linguistically the author is never more than the instance writing, just as *I* is nothing other than the instance saying *I*: language knows a 'subject', not a 'person', and this subject, empty outside of the very enunciation which defines it, suffices to make language 'hold together'. . . . (116)

Barthes evidently alludes here to Benveniste's comments on the nature of the first person pronoun and on the relationship between subjectivity and language.

The "removal of the Author" (145) in this way "utterly transforms the modern text" (145): the text is henceforth to be made and read in such a way that at all levels the author is absent" (145). Within the traditional scheme of things, Barthes points out, authorship has long been conceptualised on the basis of two

principal metaphors, the temporal and the paternal. The Author is “always conceived of as the past of his own book: book and author stand automatically in a single line divided into a *before* and *after*” (145). Equally importantly, the author is thought to “*nourish* the book” (145) and to be “in the same relation of antecedence to the work as a father to his child” (145), which is to say that he “exists before it, thinks, suffers, lives for it” (145). However,

writing can no longer designate an operation of recording, notation, representation, ‘depiction’ (as the Classics would say; rather, it designates exactly what linguists, referring to Oxford philosophy, call a performative, a rare verbal form (exclusively given in the first person and in the present tense, in which the enunciation has no other content (contains no other proposition) than the act by which it is uttered – something like the *I declare* of kings or the *I sing* of very ancient poets. (145-146)

Modern texts must be conceptualised, consequently, as Authorless. In lieu of the Author, Barthes speaks of the “scriptor” (145) who neither precedes nor ‘fathers’ the text. Rather, s/he is

born simultaneously with the text, is in no way equipped with a being preceding or exceding the writing, is not the subject with the book as predicate; there is no other time than that of the enunciation and every text is eternally written *here and now*. (145)

The scriptor’s “hand cut off from any voice, borne by a pure gesture of inscription (and not of expression), traces a field without origin--or which, at least, has no other origin than language itself, language which ceaselessly calls into question all origins” (146).

For Barthes, consequently, the “text is not a line of words releasing a single ‘theological’ meaning (the ‘message’ of the Author-God)” (146), as it were. The text is, rather, a “multidimensional space in which a variety of writings, none of them original, blend and clash. The text is a tissue of quotations drawn from the innumerable centres of culture” (146). The scriptor’s “only power is to mix writings, to counter the ones with the others” (146). The scriptor does not “*express himself*” (146). Rather, the “inner ‘thing’ he thinks to translate is itself only a ready-formed dictionary, its words only explainable through other words, and so on indefinitely” (146). The ‘scriptor’ “no longer bears within him passions, humours, feelings, impressions, but rather this immense dictionary from which he draws a writing that can know no halt” (147).

Having addressed the Author, Barthes then turns his attention to the other pole of the literary experience: the Critic (the reader). Traditional criticism has allotted itself the “important task of discovering the Author (or its hypostases: society, history, psyche, liberty) beneath the work: when the Author has been found, the text is ‘explained’” (147). 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” (147), in other words, to arrest signifying play. Once the author is done away with, the “claim to decipher a text becomes quite futile” (147). The end of the reign of the Author is also the end of the reign of the Critic, as conventionally conceived. Substituting the term ‘writing’ for literature, Barthes argues that in the “multiplicity of writing everything is to be *disentangled*, nothing *deciphered*” (147): there is “nothing beneath: the space of writing is to be ranged over, not pierced; writing ceaselessly posits meaning ceaselessly to evaporate it, carrying out a systematic evaporation of meaning” (147). Writing, by refusing to assign a ‘secret’, an ultimate meaning, to the text (and to the world as text), liberates what may be called an antitheological activity, an activity that is truly revolutionary since to refuse to fix meaning is in the end, to refuse God and his hypostases--reason, science, law. . . . (147)

Given the principle of *différance* at work in all signifying systems, the significance of an utterance has the capacity to disseminate in a potentially infinite number of directions.

Returning to the Balzac quote, Barthes’ point is that “its source, its voice, is not the true place of the writing” (147). Its true place is “reading” (147), its true source the reader. It is the reader / listener who reduces the multiplicity of possible meanings of an utterance by arresting signifying play. Pointing out that “[c]lassic criticism has never paid any attention to the reader; for it, the writer is the only person in literature” (148), Barthes argues that a

text is made of multiple writings, drawn from many cultures and entering into mutual relations of dialogue, parody, contestation, but there is one place where this multiplicity is focused and that place is the reader, not as was hitherto said, the author. The reader is the space on which all the quotations that make up a writing are inscribed without any of them being lost; a

text's unity lies not in its origin but in its destination. (148)

In short, the "birth of the reader must be at the death of the Author" (148).

In summary, because the sign operates neither referentially nor expressively, literary texts do not reflect reality nor do they express the ideas of the author. Langue, predicated upon *différance*, precedes the author determining how s/he views external reality and his/her self. It is therefore useless to seek to determine the meaning of a text by reference, as E. D. Hirsch urges us to do, to the author's intention. It is also useless to seek to verify the latter primarily by reference to what we know about his or her life. Within the traditional schema of the literary work, the author is conceptualised as something of a father to the work. Barthes points out that it may in fact be the other way around. What we know about the author is less the origin of the text than the effect of what we read there. We cannot confirm the meaning of a text by reference to the putative life of the writer; indeed, what we know about the writer is precisely what we can deduce from the text. The text, paradoxically, gives birth to the writer in this way. Barthes concludes that the primary determiner of meaning in the text is the reader who does not just passively ingest the writer's intention. Rather, the reader is the active producer of meaning who arrests signifying play in the manner that he or she sees fit.