

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.