

The Death of the Author: Past and Present

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□ ABSTRACT □

Some people claim that the death of the author is a twentieth-century issue. They think that it was initiated for the first time by Roland Barthes in 1968 and consolidated by M. Foucault and others. The objective is to manipulate this information as a justification for establishing a radical discontinuity between Modern Literary Theory and Traditional Criticism. This assumption, however, does not stand to reason. The critical establishment has always maintained that literary ubiquity is possible only through the authorial anonymity. In "Tradition and the Individual Talent", T.S. Eliot demonstrates in detail that the man of letters is a mere catalyst and that impersonality is the *differentia specifica* of literariness. Similarly, Wimsatt and Beardsley reiterate, in "The Intentional Fallacy", that any form of attention devoted to the author can be anything such as biography or psychology, but it can never be literary criticism. All the elements needed by the work of art are already in it. The symmetrical similarities between the traditional and the modern positions establish the fact that the death of the author is one of the continuities, past and present, in the literary institution.

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موت المؤلف: سابقا وحاضرا

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□ الملخص □

يعتقد البعض أن مفهوم موت المؤلف قضية نقدية خاصة بالقرن العشرين وأنها بدأت مع رولاند بارت وتعمقت مع ميشيل فوكو. إن الغاية من هذا المنظور خلق قطيعة جذرية بين نظرية الأدب الحديثة والنقد الأدبي التقليدي. ولكن حقائق المؤسسة النقدي تدحض هذا التصنيف وتؤكد أن "موت المؤلف"، كغيره من منظومة المصطلحات الحديثة، له تاريخ طويل. لقد أكد أعلام النقد التقليدي أن انتشار الأدب وعالميته يشترطان موت المؤلف. ففي "التراث والموهبة الفردية"، يبرهن ت.س. إليوت على أن الأديب العظيم وسيط حيادي وأن الموضوعية أو اللاذاتية تشكلان ماهية الهوية الأدبية. وفي "المغالطة القصديّة"، يؤكد الناقدان ويمزات وبيردزلي أن الدراسات التي تتناول المؤلف تنتمي إلى السيرة الذاتية أو التحليل النفسي ولكنها لا يمكن أن تكون نقدا أدبيا. ويضيفان أن العناصر الضرورية للعمل الإبداعي مودعة وموجودة داخل النص ذاته. هذه القواسم المشتركة بين النقد التقليدي ونظرية الأدب الحديثة براهين نسقية وثائقية خلاصتها أن موت المؤلف هو واحدة ثابته المؤسسة الأدبية منذ البدايات الأولى.

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Since the publication of Roland Barthes's essay "The Death of the Author", there has been a lot of resistance and criticism to Modern Literary Theory. The traditionalists accuse the modernists of terminating the position of the author, who is usually looked at as the creator *par excellence*. He, so the story goes, initiates and produces super, unique works, which have not existed before. It is true that a few critics have given priority to the artist, such as Sydney and the Romantics. However, as will be demonstrated in detail later on, the mainstream critical attitude confirms the redundancy of the author.

Sidney, for example, believes that the poet does not imitate reality, but he creates an alternative golden world. Indeed, he even makes a distinction between the artist on the one hand and all other writers on the other. He says that people from all other disciplines imitate nature. They replicate reality. The artist, Sidney claims, is the only one who does not imitate (Daiches 58). He is both a maker and a diviner. He creates a "golden" world which is so perfect that reality itself will aspire to imitate it (8). But any scrutiny of Sidney's position will reveal that his perspective does not stand to reason. He himself confirms that the artist has a moral message. This ethical content comes from the religious establishment. Put differently, the artist is not a genuine initiator. It is true that he does not imitate reality but he resorts to the religious sources. No wonder, some critics feel that Sidney has compromised the author's position by relegating him to the second rank after the men of religion.

Similarly, the Romantics argue that the poet is the centre of gravity, and the sole hero in the literary process. They emphasize that the poem is the poet and the poet is the poem. In his "Preface to Lyrical Ballads", William Wordsworth, like Sir Phillip Sidney, acknowledges that the poet is the Prime Mover. Wordsworth says: "For all good poetry is the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings" (p.165). Moreover, Wordsworth portrays the poet as a special kind of human being, whose feelings are subtler, compared with the amount of sensibility acquired by the normal person. Wordsworth claims that the poet is a man "possessed of more than usual organic sensibility"(165). He also reiterates that the poet is a superman in terms of his capacity to affect the emotions and imagination of any reader. He says:

He [the poet] is a man speaking to men: a man, it is true, endowed with more lively sensibility, more enthusiasm and tenderness, who has a greater knowledge of human nature, and a more comprehensive soul, than are supposed to be common among mankind (171).

Wordsworth sees that the poem is a transparent medium of the author's passions, feelings and thoughts. He declares that "whatever passions he [the poet] communicates to his Reader, those passions, if his Reader's mind be sound and vigorous, should always be accompanied with an overbalance of pleasure" (180). Moreover, the poet is endowed with a great autonomy. The whole world can be redundant for him. The Romantics give the impression that all the required paraphernalia of poetry are deposited and embedded inside the poet. This includes inspiration, motivation and the *raisons d'être* of creativity. He confirms that "The poet is chiefly distinguished from other men by a greater promptness to think and feel without immediate external excitement" (176).

It is obvious that the forte of the Romantic poet is his own weakness. Spontaneity is a Janus-faced formula. It might suggest the poet's priority in the sense that he is the source. At the same time, it undermines his centrality. Spontaneity entails the absence of authorship, and the marginality of craft. It actually reduces the position of the poet to a mere medium. This is what T.S. Eliot strongly demonstrates when he talks about the idea

of the “catalyst”(74). The poet, for Eliot, is a passive vehicle through which poetry becomes possible: “The mind of the poet is the shred of platinum”(74). No wonder, he severely attacks the Romantics in “Tradition and the Individual Talent”. It is an established fact now that the Romantics were not artistically autonomous. The sacred fountain was not a personal reservoir. Their reliance on the literature of the Renaissance, the middle Ages and ancient mythology is central. This intertextual dimension confirms that the author is not the prime source of his writings. In other words, to understand a poem, the reader must consult areas not related to the poet himself.

This is clearly the case in Wordsworth’s poetry. His poem, “The World Is Too Much with us” ‘for example ‘bubbles over with mythological references, which impede reading and undermine the claimed transparency:

For this, for everything, we are out of tune;
It moves not. Great God! I’d rather be
A Pagan suckled in a creed outworn;
So might I, standing on this pleasant lea,
Have glimpses that would make less forlorn;
Have sight of Proteus rising from the sea;
Or hear Old Triton blow his wreathed horn.

There is no doubt that the ultimate meaning of the poem above is not transparent. Moreover, it is not controlled by the poet himself. In order to decipher the messages, the reader must decode a number of mythological terms that transform the text into an intertext: Proteus and Old Triton. In addition, the reader must address the unfamiliar quest for Paganism and away from God. Of course ‘the strange word order in” Pagan suckled”, “creed outworn” and “might I” plays a strategic role in constructing the theme of the poem. In other words, the author is not any more the source of semanticity. His role is taken over by the text itself. Moreover, the concept of the “Negative Capability” as defined by John Keats undercuts the poet’s dominance and centrality. It is a disciplining strategy that undermines the poet’s control over, and identification with, the poem. The Negative Capability crystallizes “when man is capable of being in uncertainties, mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact and reason” (419). Keats confirms that Shakespeare distinguishes himself by this quality. No wonder, he canonizes this practice as the *differentia specifica* that “form[s] a man of achievement especially in literature”(419).

Moreover, this concept is a quest for depersonalization and distance. The poet is no longer the frame of reference. The poem achieves its necessary autonomy through its indeterminacy, undecidability and Janus-facedness. In short, the Romantic case ‘once scrutinized as above ‘will subscribe to the mainstream predilection which is the death of the author.

The textual analysis above demonstrates that the death of the author comes from within literature itself. The theory that appears later on is not imposed on the text. On the contrary, it is called for by the primary sources themselves. The important issue at this stage, however, is to find out how this theory addresses what literature has already thematized. In 1968 ‘Roland Barthes published his famous article, “The Death of the Author”. Its publication gave the false impression that the removal of the artist is a novelty that categorically belongs to Modern Literary Theory. However, before addressing the traditional sources which reiterate the death of the author, it is worth identifying the manifestations of this issue in Barthes’s essay.

Barthes relies on multiple arguments in order to demonstrate the solidity of his thesis. Before starting the theoretical framework, he inductively resorts to literature. What he discovers is that literary texts do not foreground a single voice or consolidate a certain identity. He confirms that "writing is the destruction of every voice, of every point of origin" (142). He demonstrates that it is almost impossible to know the speaker in the literary text. This neutralizes writing and makes the position of the author redundant. In addition to this voicelessness, Barthes draws attention to the intransitiveness of the literary discourse. The text is not an annexation to reality or a project for reformulating it. On the contrary, it is almost without any function other than the practice of writing as writing, which recalls "The Intentional Fallacy" by Wimsatt and Beardsley (1946) which will be addressed in detail later on. No wonder, Barthes states that when writing begins "the author enters into his own death" (142).

The second manifestation of the death of the author is reversal or metalepsis. Instead of being the writer of the work or putting himself in the work, the author is written by, or becomes a copy of, the work itself. Talking about Proust, he says that Proust "made his very life a work for which his own book was the model" (144). As will be seen later on in Foucault, the author is the product, not the producer, of his own corpus. Moreover, Barthes finds in Surrealism a strong case for the "desacrilization of the image of the Author" (144). This is embodied in the subversion of the horizon of the semantic expectations. It is also manifested in the concept of automatic writing which gives priority to the hand over the head. In addition, the fact that the Surrealists believe in the simultaneity of collective writing—different writers writing at the same time—confirms the de-individualization and depersonalization of authorship. This automatism reminds of the Romantic spontaneity of powerful emotions and the composition of poems under the effect of drugs or opium. The collective experience, as will be seen, echoes the concept of tradition in T.S. Eliot.

But the strongest argument that Barthes performs to establish the death of the author is what he calls multi-dimensionality. The literary text is a pastiche "in which a variety of writings, non of them original, blend and clash" (146). He adds that this "tissue of quotations [is] drawn from the innumerable centres of culture" (146). In other words, nothing in the author's text is actually by the author himself. His role is reduced to the task of arrangement, combination and putting the jigsaw bits and pieces together. Indeed, a novel like Dickens's *Hard Times* is a perfect illustration of this perspective. Dickens draws heavily on the *Bible*, the *Arabian Nights*, folklore, the nursery rhymes, sport, science and the circus in writing his text. The outcome is that there is almost no Dickens in *Hard Times*. No wonder, the Formalists argue that with or without Columbus, America would have been discovered. The author is completely redundant.

Most of Barthes's ideas mentioned above are reiterated in Michael Foucault's article, "What Is an Author?". Foucault offers other reasons to illustrate and confirm the necessity of the death of the author. From the very beginning, he refers to the author as an "it" to introduce his concept which is based on depersonalization. First of all, he reiterates Barthes's idea about the impossibility of determining the voice of the speaker and intransitivity. Foucault quotes Samuel Beckett's rhetorical question: "What matter who is speaking, someone said, what matter who is speaking?" (115). He goes on to say that writing "has freed itself from the necessity of expression"; it only refers to itself" (116). "This interiority", as Foucault says, confirms that "the essential basis of this writing is not the exalted emotions related to the act of composition or the insertion of a subject into language" (116). The same point surfaces again in his definition of *écriture* which is

exclusive of any reference to the author because its central preoccupation is writing as writing (see 119).

Such a reversal becomes the major point when Foucault demonstrates that the author is a function and not a person. Here he starts by making a distinction between what he calls the “signatory, the writer, and the underwriter” (124). These are not authors because what they do does not “characterize the existence, circulation and operation of certain discourses within a society” (124). To make the metalepsis complete, Foucault redefines the author-function as a set of criteria taken from Saint Gerome. They are “a standard level of quality”, “a certain field of conceptual or theoretical coherence”, “a stylistic uniformity” and “a definite historical figure” (128). These parameters are crucial for identifying literary works that belong to a certain author and eliminating those that do not belong to him. The logic is that any uniformity, be it aesthetic, conceptual or stylistic, is a solid evidence of the literary works in question. Put differently, the author is not any more a person. He is a quality, a style or a concept. Consequently, it will be myopic to speak about the author as somebody who produces literature. It is literature that creates the author. This is not alien to the history of literary studies because early in time stories, folk tales and epics had no authors. The person’s anonymity was replaced by the textual ubiquity.

Barthes and Foucault are the major voices in Modern Literary Theory as far as the death of the author is concerned. Suffice it here to add that they are not the only two sources. The formalists argue for the removal of the author. They believe that everything including language and imagery is created by the Lord. The author does not create or invent. He simply re-writes and re-arranges the literature already written. Shklovsky argues that “images change little; from century to century, from nation to nation, from poet to poet; they flow on without changing. Images belong to no one: they are the Lord’s” (7).

Similarly, modern linguistics preaches the autonomy of language which is self-contained and auto-referential. Words are explainable only through other words according to the concept of differentiability. The author has no control over the processes of language. Indeed, the death of the author is one of the immediate consequences of linguistic studies.

Jacques Derrida goes a step further. He argues that no one speaks the language. It is the language that speaks people. Because everything has inside it its own necessary critique or counterpart, deconstruction is inevitable. Moreover, meaning, as Derrida explains, is never complete. It is always deferred and postponed. This is why no speaker has authority over his/her speech. Indeed, it does not matter what direction the speaker takes. His language always goes in the opposite direction. It is its own author. Derrida confirms “that language bears within itself the necessity of its own critique” (155).

The same position applies to structuralism, which is an extension of linguistics to literary studies. Structuralism is a theory of models which comprise the set of relationships between the different elements of the text. Every work is a manifestation of, or an embodiment of the underlying system. In other words, exactly as the *parole* is already written by the *langue*, every text is already governed and sub-structured by the poetics, morphology or grammar of literature. Literature, like language, is self-contained and self-regulated to the extent that there is no role or position for the author.

It is clear that Modern Literary Theory argues for the death of the author. But this concept is not limited to these theories. It is a continuation and an elaboration of the same idea already introduced by traditional criticism. In “Tradition and the Individual Talent”, for example, T.S. Eliot makes a very strong argument which demonstrates not only the necessity of the death of the author, but its positive implications for both the individual voice and the literary institution. As most readers know, Eliot denies the artist any

subjective presence or contribution. Instead of being the maker of the literary work, the artist becomes, according to Eliot, a mere medium. This idea arises from a number of sources. First of all, the artist, as Eliot explains, has no personality to articulate. On the contrary, even if that personality happens to be there, the great artist knows that the major task is to avoid its actualization. Eliot says that poetry “is not the expression of personality, but an escape from personality”. He goes on to make clear that “only those who have personality and emotions know what it means to want to escape from these things” (76). In other words, Eliot indirectly associates the personal with the inartistic, and the impersonal with the artistic.

The same is emphasized by the concept of the catalyst. Here, Eliot wants to underline objectivity by arguing that art is its own author. Once the product is finished, there is no trace of the artist in it. She/he is a mere catalyst. Such a perspective reminds of Foucault’s position already argued, when he establishes that the author is the product of the literary works not the other way round. Moreover, exactly as Roland Barthes demonstrates that the existence of literature is paradoxically at the expense of the author, Eliot illustrates that the author’s mortality is the way to immortality. “The progress of an artist is a continual self-sacrifice, and a continual extinction of personality” (73).

Eliot believes that no artist is complete alone. To achieve the necessary significance, every artist must enter into a relational frame or order with the others. Put differently, the individual must become a part of the larger system or tradition for the sake of continuous contrast and comparison. This transforms the syntagmatic process into a higher paradigmatic simultaneity. This issue is reciprocal in the sense that it applies to what is already written and to the new contribution at the same time. Accordingly “the relations, proportions, values of each work of art towards the whole are readjusted” (72). Eliot’s concept of the simultaneous order anticipates the self-contained systematicity which is introduced as already argued by both modern linguistics and structuralism. The same, of course, applies to relationality, differentiability and atemporality all of which exclude the author.

Eliot reiterates that the removal of the artist and the priority of tradition do not mean non-creativity. According to him, tradition is neither “heredity” nor mechanical “repetition”. On the contrary, it is “great labour”. No wonder, Eliot manages to achieve a balanced reapproachment in which the most individual and the most traditional become each other. This recalls Barthes’ concept of writing as an embroidered pastiche, where the single voice is replaced by a multiplicity of voices and the monistic text becomes a multi-text.

This confirms Michael Bakhtin’s concept of polyphony. According to him, the author muffles his own voice and leaves the narrative arena to the characters who are endowed with the necessary self-consciousness. They become autonomous voices each of which plays the role of an author. At the same time, polyphony entails a non-hierarchical discourse in the sense that both inferiority and superiority are replaced by a new form of relativity. It is crucial that the author’s position itself is also relativized. Moreover, these voices do not reiterate each other because they are not monologically created. On the contrary, heteroglossia dominates and makes everything in the book, as Bakhtin says, dialogic. In other words, polyphony is another powerful perspective which confirms the death of the author and the full autonomy of the text. Bakhtin defines it as “A plurality of independent and unmerged voices and consciousness” (6).

It is important here to add that such a strategy that distinguishes the greatest artists of all time such as Homer, Shakespeare and Bakhtin’s favourite novelist, Dostoevsky. These

have liberated the text from the authority of the author and given it full independence. Everything that the text needs is embedded in it.

The idea that everything the text requires is already deposited inside it, and that everything the text does not require is excluded from it is the major contribution of “The Intentional Fallacy” by W.K.Wimsatt and Monroe C. Beardsley. This article is, as David Lodge confirms, a central document “in the development of modern critical theory” (333). Lodge also considers it as part of the dominant trajectory in critical studies since the forties and the fifties. The major objective of this critical phenomenon is to canonize a textual approach which is “undistracted by inquiries into its origins in personal experience or effects on particular individuals” (333).

Wimsatt and Beardsley focus on the constituents of the canon and the parameters of judgement. They want to demonstrate that “the author is neither available nor desirable as a standard for judging the success of a work” (334). Then, they give a definition of the word “intention” as “the author’s attitude towards his work, the way he felt, what made him write” (Lodge 334). Such a concept is undoubtedly suitable for understanding other documents or texts which are by definition non-literary such as a practical message, a will, a contract or a constitution (335).

The work of art is completely different. The argument is really an either/or question. In other words, if the work deserves the literary identity, it will be autonomous and complete. Wimsatt and Beardsley confirm that “Poetry succeeds because all or most of what is said or implied is relevant; what is irrelevant has been excluded” (335).

Accordingly, they make a sharp distinction between the available kinds of evidence needed for making a critical judgment. This is so important that heterogeneous critical approaches hinge on the quality of the evidence. Literary criticism is based on internal textual elements such as syntax, diction and imagery, all of which are public and objective. By contrast, “author psychology”, as Wimsatt and Beardsley make clear, depends on the external, extra-textual and non-linguistic realia.

Of course, the domain of critical studies is clearly delineated and has little and almost nothing to do with author psychology or biography. No wonder, Wimsatt and Beardsley reiterate the obvious point that the work of art “is detached from the author at birth and goes about the world beyond his power to intend about it or control it” (335). Otherwise, hunting for intentions and looking for personal idiosyncrasies will be as mysterious as “consulting the oracle” (344). “The Intentional Fallacy” has the highest frequency in the arguments related to the death of the author.

As this essay has demonstrated in detail, Roland Barthes’ removal of the author is not an idea limited to modern literary theory. The survival of the artist is definitely at the expense of the work itself. By analogy, the birth of the text requires a process of liberation from its own author. In other words, the continuity between traditional criticism and modern literary theory, as the case above confirms, is solid and deeply rooted. Indeed, Raman Selden, in his *Theory of Criticism: From Plato to the Present*, draws attention to the fact that this issue is both traditional and modern. Under the subtitle of “Impersonality and the Death of the Author”, he lists a number of voices including John Keats, Ezra Pound, T.S. Eliot, W.K. Wimsatt, Susanne Langer and Roland Barthes. In Chapter Four, he quotes large extracts from all of them after a short introduction. Indirectly, Raman Selden is suggesting that there might be some common denominators. The problem is that he does not address the issue in detail. This shortcoming is remedied by the argument above.

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