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Intentionality

a cura di
edited by
Massimo Leone

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Ideology and Science in the Debate about the Non–Existence of the Author

UGO VOLLI*

TITOLO ITALIANO: Ideologia e scienza nel dibattito intorno alla non–esistenza dell'autore

ABSTRACT: This article tries to explore the meaning of the famous polemic of the Sixties in which Barthes and Foucault supported the “nonexistence of the author”, showing its ideological and non–scientific character and the link with an anti–humanistic project whose philosophical roots are found in Heidegger and the political ones in Marxism. It is further argued that semiotics, in light of its competence on narrative syntax, has the tools to show the scientific groundlessness and the pretentious character of the controversy.

KEYWORDS: Author; Narrator; Barthes; Foucault; Semiotics; Text Intentionality.

I.

As Leo Strauss (1952) masterfully showed, when we find in a strong theoretical work a thesis which is evidently inconsistent and baseless, it is worth asking why this proposition was inserted in the text. There are three main answers to this question. The first and more traditional one is that these are mistakes, imperfections, confusions, maybe bad transcriptions, or that we ourselves have not understood and misinterpreted a correct thesis. According to all these hypotheses, the author is not responsible for the error. The second answer, that of Strauss,

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proposes the idea that in these cases, in order to save himself from possible persecution and repression, the author is purposely hiding his own positions, pretending “in front of the masses” to support points that he does not share, but he is purposely leaving in his work trivial errors and inconsistencies in order to let the “wise few” understand that his secret opinion is very different. Strauss has shown that this situation is often found in the history of philosophy, for example in the cases of Maimonides and Spinoza: this is an important contribution to the technique of interpretation, which semiotics should assimilate.

But there is also a third possible reason: a bold ideological stance, a political attitude which defies good sense, with the conviction of obtaining consent (even from oneself) precisely because of its tough groundlessness: *credo quia absurdum*. Someone can make absurd his position, just in order to solicit faith. Ideology can be defined exactly as the decision not to let the wretched empirical facts obscure his own sublime convictions. Someone can not wrongly believe that farther from the empirical facts is his position, the more it can become the object of ideological belief. Call it “intellectual provocation”: *épater le bourgeois* is always a good communication strategy in order to acquire the precious status of original thinker and *maitre à penser*. And if there are some people who don't buy the thesis, this fact will be considered not a demonstration of its own weakness, but the clear proof of how reactionary and evil is the position of those who refuse the “revolutionary truth”.

The mechanism is the same of the beginning of famous Andersen's fable *The Emperor's New Clothes*: the scammers who sell to the emperor non-existent clothes at a high price are careful to point out before their show that only the wicked ones will not see their marvelous product. This is a powerful ideological device: you need being an “innocent” kid in order to dare to tell that the king is naked. And it is not useless to add that in many circumstances to say a truth contrary to ideology is expensive. This third case of “faith test” is the most likely when the baseless position is not an individual one, but it is collectively shared by some group or intellectual sect.

This is clearly the case of “postmodernism”. There is a huge anomaly, a real pragmatic self-contradiction, when Michel Foucault writes that «it is meaningless to speak in the name of — or against — Reason, Truth, or Knowledge» (in May 1993, p. 2) or «All my analyses

are against the idea of universal necessities in human existence» or again that «reason is the ultimate language of madness» (1965, p. 95); or when Stanley Fish confesses happily, «relieves me of the obligation to be right [...] and demands only that I be interesting» (1992, p. 190). What these authors tell is the exact denial of what they do, namely theoretically arguing. The closest ancestor of these positions was Nietzsche's thesis that «there are no facts, only interpretations» (1885–1887, p. 299; for more general criticism, see Ferraris 2012), paradoxically presented in turn as a fact. These texts are plain, easy to interpret, and the timing does not allow the hypothesis of transcription errors. Postmodernists lived in democratic and open societies, even if they preferred to deny it, and had a prominent position in the intellectual system, such that no one could think of repressing them and they had no need to mystify their opinions, according to the Straussian hypothesis.

Examples of this inconsistency could be multiplied *ad lib*, but these are enough for understanding that any discussion would be futile in these terms. Postmodernism is a form of self-defeating nihilistic intellectual religion — unless it is the opposite, under a Strauss strategy: the demonstration of the rational impossibility of relativism or rather and more probably a rhetoric device for legitimizing a bankruptcy, subversive politic stance already discarded by history (Hicks 2004) — but for sure this was not the intention of their authors. With postmodernism, what is true is the third hypothesis, that of the mechanism of ideology; not the Straussian one, implying the existence of a message to be kept secret to all, except for a select few. There is no message, only the totalitarian will to use their speech to make that of dissenters impossible and win the admiration of self-hating bourgeois.

This is not the place for discussing this movement or intellectual stance in all its implications. But semiotics is directly called into question by this discourse. Let us start there from some very common although rarely explicitly expressed thesis of postmodernism and cultural studies. I will express them in the most direct and therefore the most naive and uncritical form:

- a) there is not such a thing as the meaning of an expression. Meaning is just interpretation and in general it depends on strength relationships;

- b) there is not such a thing as the author of a text. Authorship is just a social invention and an interpretation;
- c) interpretation is free, not bound to some principle. However, it reflects the interpreter's position, i.e. his or her gender, ethnicity, race, sexual orientation, political affiliation, etc.

The polemical object of these theses is evidently the diligent analysis of the texts, that aims at the purpose of clarifying their meaning and their intentionality (or their intentionalities in the plural, if we accept the hypothesis of Eco [1979]) with the purpose of replacing it with voluntarily "subversive" political readings, deconstructing the European cultural tradition and replacing it with a "revolutionary" hegemony.

The main strategy used by postmodernist for justifying this stance is limiting oneself to the textual level, which after all is the one on which the theoretical discussions are rewoven. Over a textual surface you can find no meaning, of course, because a text always works as a sign in the Peircean sense «A sign is an object which stands for another to some mind» (*Writings of Charles S. Peirce: A Chronological Edition*, vol. 3: 1872–8, p. 68), and the referred or signified object, be it some concrete or abstract thing, is always another, something not present in the text. And not even the author, of course, can be in the text, because the "I" that stands for him is never more than a trace. As Charles Baudelaire wrote (*Lettre du Voyant, à Paul Demeny, 15 Mai 1871*) «Je est un autre». External to the text must also be its interpretation, since no text can include its entire interpretation, without falling into a regression, in which the interpretation would in turn be interpreted and so on to infinity.

So, from a postmodernist point of view, those entities that could have an ontological external existence in front of the text, namely author and meaning, literally do not exist, because the analysis must be limited to the surface of text. So texts are always enclosed in themselves as windowless monads. On the other hand, they can not claim the same nonexistence with regard to interpretation, just because postmodernist practice takes always the shape of analysis of previous texts and therefore their discourse is always somehow an interpretation (thus in an eminent manner in the case of Derrida). But all interpretation of a text is another text, which is again a windowless monad. The

new text of course “exists”, but as such is “groundless” (not by chance the same way as the “Being” of Heidegger 1929) and therefore is not bound by any rule to any external reality, including the commented text. It has no responsibility towards anyone or anything, it must not even be intellectually loyal to his object, because at its textual level it has no reference, object or meaning. What is worth noting here is that these ideas depend on a “closure of the text” that may seem common to some aspect of the semiotic theory (Marrone 2010). Let’s examine this point better.

One of the first axioms of postmodernism is indeed «il n’y a pas de hors text», «there is nothing outside of the text» (Derrida 1988, p. 144) and this seems something very close to the very known and so often quoted exclamation of Algeirdas Greimas «There is no salvation outside the text!». In fact, this last proposition is not found in a well thought written text, but only orally pronounced by Greimas answering questions at the end of an important conference dedicated to him (Marrone 2009). Its metaphorical and provocative character immediately emerges from the wording: Greimas is not denying the “existence” of anything beyond text, but the possibility of “salvation” in it. In the expression it is obvious reading a clearly autoironic reference to Catholic theology, namely to the well known sentence of St. Cyprian in Epistle 72 to Pope Stephen «Salus extra ecclesiam non est». But what could be “salvation” for a scholar of texts, a semiotic? Of course only a method can be the guarantee of disciplinary work.

It is worth emphasizing again the difference between these two expressions. Beyond the formal similarity, the point is that the expression of Derrida has a gnoseologic, if not metaphysical claim, where Greimas speaks at epistemological level. Derrida’s thesis (as the other postmodernist principle that I have quoted) should be read as an elaboration of Gorgias famous stance elaborated in the lost book *On Nature or the Non-Existent*:

- a) nothing exists;
- b) even if something exists, nothing can be known about it; and
- c) even if something can be known about it, knowledge about it can’t be communicated to others
- d) even if it can be communicated, it cannot be understood. (Sprague B3.77–84)

On the contrary, Greimas is not denying (nor stating) anything about the structure of the reality or about its knowability. He is just proposing some methodological limits to the specific semiotic work, namely: in order to perform a pure semiotic analysis, one should not rely on extratextual knowledge, but the analysis must be limited to exploring in depth the internal structures of the text. This is what is called, not by chance, “the principle of immanence”. Semiotics does not deny in principle that other researches around texts, for example historical, sociological, psychological and even neurological investigations, can be well founded and scientifically useful. However, according to Greimas’ proposal (from which it is legitimate to dissent and many in fact disagree), it limits its investigations to the extent of the text. Indeed it makes the rational definition of these boundaries (usually called “decoupage”) the first result and at the same time the prerequisite of the research.

There are very obvious consequences of this difference in principle. Semiotics absolutely does not deny the existence of meaning, on the contrary it investigates how the text produces meaning effects, because it is well aware of the Saussurian principle for which never we can find pure signs, namely meaningless signifiers, but in order something being a sign it must always be a “two-sided entity” where signifier and meaning cannot be separated without destroying the sign effect (and even more so for the text, which is a complex fabric of signs held together by some general meaning relation). On the contrary, the objectivity of the signifier that is materially present in the analysis is what allows us to investigate how are produced the meaning effects that make its communicative value. This is exactly the heart of semiotic work.

While also semiotics recognizes that the author is necessarily always absent from its work, it takes into consideration the act of enunciation as transcendental horizon of the text, necessarily presupposed in every enunciate and therefore it seeks in every text traces of the enunciation, its simulacra, its more or less explicit masks. The author is not in the text, but every text speaks of him/her, shows his/her activity, recalls his/her *Encyclopedy*. These two levels of research together constitute the mechanism of intentionality of the text, and their correlative investigation is part of every semiotic study. But instead of focusing on these well-known research methodologies, it is worth-

while here to study the peculiar notion of author, which is perhaps peripheral to the nihilism of postmodernism, but has a peculiar and not fully explored semiotic interest.

2.

Let us start from the definition of the word “author” In the Merriam–Webster (<https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/author>). We find two main meanings:

- a person who starts or creates something (such as a plan or idea);
- a person who has written something; especially: a person who has written a book or who writes many books.

Other authoritative dictionaries as Cambridge (<https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/author>), Collins (<https://www.collinsdictionary.com/dictionary/english/author>), or Oxford dictionaries (<https://en.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/author>) mention more or less the same definitions, often with the same exact words. Renouncing for the moment to analyze these definitions in depth, it is worthwhile to integrate them with some etymological information, which will allow us to quickly enter into a theoretical discussion about this concept. In fact in this word there is something much more than the craftsmanship of the director or writer. Again the Merriam–Webster suggests this derivation:

Middle English *auctour*, from Anglo–French *auctor*, *autor*, from Latin *auctor*, promoter, originator, author, from *augēre*, to increase.

More details are found in one etymological dictionary:

Mid–14c., *auctor*, *autour*, *autor* “father, creator, one who brings about, one who makes or creates” someone or something, from Old French *auctor*, *acteur* “author, originator, creator, instigator” (12c., Modern French *auteur*) and directly from Latin *auctor* “promoter, producer, father, progenitor; builder, founder; trustworthy writer, authority; historian; performer, doer; responsible person, teacher”, literally “one who causes to grow”, agent

noun from *auctus*, past participle of *augere* “to increase”, from PIE root **aug-* (1) “to increase”.

From late 14c. as “a writer, one who sets forth written statements, original composer of a writing” (as distinguished from a compiler, translator, copyist, etc.). Also from late 14c. as “source of authoritative information or opinion”, now archaic but the sense behind authority, etc. In Middle English the word was sometimes confused with *actor*. The *-t-* changed to *-th-* 16c., on model of change in Medieval Latin, on mistaken assumption of Greek origin and confusion with *authentic*. (<https://www.etymonline.com/word/author>)

This is the commonly accepted etymological path. But the great linguist Émile Benveniste (1969) was not entirely satisfied with this explanation:

Cet ensemble rattaché à *augeo* s’est ensuite disloqué en cinq groupes : 1) *augeo*, *augmentum* ; 2) *auctor*, *auctoritas* ; 3) *augur*, *augurium* ; 4) *augustus* ; 5) *auxilium*, *auxilior*, *auxiliaris*. Mais « le sens premier de *augeo* se retrouve par l’intermédiaire de *auctor* dans *auctoritas* » : « Toute parole prononcée avec autorité détermine un changement dans le monde, crée quelque chose » ; elle a le pouvoir qui fait surgir les plantes, qui donne existence à une loi. Et « augmenter » n’est donc qu’un sens secondaire et affaibli de *augeo*, non pas celui dont dérivent *auctor* et *auctoritas*. « Des valeurs obscures et puissantes demeurent dans cette *auctoritas*, ce don réservé à peu d’hommes de faire surgir quelque chose et — à la lettre — de produire à l’existence ».¹

So, calling “creator” an author is not just a metaphor. The only true Author, following this linguistic path, is only God. According to this concept, which lasted undisputed until the full affirmation of modernity, but of which we have traces still today, also the great masters (in literature, arts etc.) are not only just artists but somehow real Authors (with capital letter) although their authorship belongs to a second level, originating from the primary divine creation. Also the notion of “possible world”, widespread in philosophy after Leibniz

1. This set attached to *augeo* was then broken up into five groups: 1) *augeo*, *augmentum*; 2) *auctor*, *auctoritas*; 3) *augur*, *augurium*; 4) *augustus*; 5) *auxilium*, *auxilior*, *auxiliaris*. But «the primary meaning of *augeo* is found through *auctor* in *auctoritas*»: «Every word pronounced with authority determines a change in the world, creates something»; it has the power that makes plants appear, which gives existence to a law. And “to increase” is therefore only a secondary and weakened sense of *augeo*, not the one from which *auctor* and *auctoritas* derive. «Dark and powerful values remain in this *auctoritas*, this gift reserved for few men to bring out something and — literally — to produce existence» [*my translation*, U.V.].

and today widely used in logic, semiotics and above all in narratology, responds to this logic: who invents a story, an image, a movie, but also who imagines, desires, promises, fears something, “is creating” a “possible world” that has the characteristics described in the text. The metaphor of “artistic creation” triumphs in the romantic age, but the idea of “inspiration” (by a Muse, a personal Genius, by the Talent or directly by the Omnipotent) is as old as Homer and the Bible. “Inspiring” (namely “blowing in” some material to give it life), is the divine action, as seen for example in Genesis 2.

This small etymological analysis serves to establish that the notion of author, that seems so natural, because it describes an indispensable condition for the production of any work, that is the existence of someone who designed and executed it, is also a social institution whose specific determinations are cultural. Authorship entails also a certain way of thinking about the production and authority of texts, which has not always been there, has changed in different cultures over time. But can we say that the postmodernist refusal of the notion of author is limited to this line of “creationist” thinking about the author? It is worthwhile to briefly explore its development to better understand this point. Let us make a very simple historical scheme.

In a first phase, extended to a good part of the so-called primitive societies and at the beginning of our ones, we know no authors, in the simplest sense of some identified producers of the text. There is no historic and identifiable author for the *Pentateuch*, for the Egyptian *Book of the Dead*, for *Iliad* and *Odyssey*, for Gilgamesh (even if they can have mythical authors like Homer or the very complex figure of Moses – see Volli 2012).

The second phase begins in the so-called “axial epoch”, between the 8th and 6th centuries, with the Hebrew prophets, Hesiod and the Greek lyric etc. The authors assert themselves by writing about themselves, becoming characters of themselves. Isaiah tells of his own vocation, Sappho of his love. The full “author” is born with the use of the first person at least in part of the text. But in semiotic terms, what we describe as author (the “external” or “real” one, but always a social figure) is here a product of the narrator (the internal one, a semiotic essential device, which is an implicit part of every text). This does not mean that the author is not there, but only that its appearance in the text is the result of a social convention that authorizes it. In the

same way the painters, as authors of the images, have always been there from the earliest figurations on the neolithic caves. But only at a certain point did they begin to sign their paintings and perhaps depict themselves in them. It is a social innovation that concerns the representation of the author, not his existence.

The author is therefore born by writing “I”, or something “we”: to say it with a motto that became famous with the Renaissance, et in Arcadia ego: to be an author means becoming part of a literary republic, albeit very competitive and in pastoral version. As noted by Detienne (1995), this passage is contemporary and parallel to the signature of works of art and in a similar way it develops in a habit of professionalism: Pindar gets paid as Zeusi. But they are paid by those exalted in their works, not by general public. In Rome the authors sold their text to the “publishers” of the time, giving them all rights.

In the Middle Ages we witness for a long time a return to a situation similar the first phase. The new literature and European art is born anonymous and the only recognized authors are those of the past. The intellectual production in theology and philosophy are organized in a kind of scale of authority. In medieval scholastic Latin, *auctoritas* is defined as the affirmation or the doctrine of a doctor authenticus (or auctor), which can be used as the foundation of a demonstration. The auctor is therefore who guarantees the will or the affirmations of others. In a more restricted sense, auctor is properly considered a philosopher, a writer, a poet who has the power of persuasion and can serve as a guide and a witness, generating an opinion worthy of being followed.

For instance Ugucione da Pisa distinguished between auctor as augmentator, a word which also comes from *augeo*, and author as inventor artium, who must be a person of great authority. Ugucione did however derive the word author (as a poet, and with the same *auctoritas*), from the verb *auieo* = *ligare*, in a step certainly known and followed by Dante (Alighieri 1304–7) in the *Convivio* (Banquet), IV, VI, 3–5². In the same work the term authority appears several times

2. Cf. Alighieri D. (1304–1307) *Il convivio* (eng. trans. *The Banquet*, <https://digitaldante.columbia.edu/text/library/the-convivio/>); (1303–1305) *De vulgari eloquentia* (eng. trans. http://alighieri.letteraturaoperaomnia.org/translate_english/alighieri_dante_de_vulgari_eloquentia.html).

(e.g. IV, VI, 18: «congiungasi la filosofica autoritade con la imperiale»)³, and in the important place of the book IV, VI, 3–5 Dante tries to rely on Aristotle's "authority" in order to demonstrate his right to the supreme moral predominance. Auctor therefore (although Dante does not designate this figure with this name but, as for Virgil, he calls him "my teacher" in I, IX, 9) here means "dignissimo di fede e d'obediencia"⁴. On the contrary, in the *De vulgari eloquentia* (II, VI, 7) auctores are poets. In *Inf. I*, 85 by calling Virgil "my author", he wants to qualify him as someone who, by his example, inspires the actions of others and is "guide", "creator", "promoter". In *The Divine Comedy Inf. IV*, 113 «di grande autorità ne' lor sembianti»⁵, the term "author" assumes the value of "great influence" due to the wisdom, honor, magnanimity of the characters mentioned. Of God, supreme auctor, inspirer of the divine auctoritas (the Scripture) and source of truth, Dante speaks in *Par. xxvi*, 40 «Sternel la voce del verace autore, / che dice a Moisé, di sé parlando: / "Io ti farò vedere ogne valore"»⁶. This is maybe the most important literary proclamation in European culture that God is "the true author". Said by a poet who was perhaps the first in Middle Age to claim for himself an almost prophetic role, it is a definitively influential idea. Not so much in its direct form, which will slowly be made weaker by the process of secularization that develops in Europe from Humanism onwards, but in the conversational form that derives from it culturally if not logically. We can summarize it this way: if the only true author is the Creator, then also the authors (at least the great authors, who are also somehow true Authors too) must be creators. The pretention of a "creativity" of artists and writers goes hand in hand with the claim of their "authorship", beyond the fact that the professional status of the author remains substantially unprotected for twenty centuries up to the thresholds of bourgeois society.

The firsts of these "privileges" which assign legal rights to works of authorship date back to the at the beginning of the XVIth century, and they generally protect printers, not authors. Aldo Manuzio is perhaps

3. «Join the philosophical authority with the imperial».

4. "Very dignified of faith and obedience".

5. «Of great authority in their appearances».

6. «The voice of the true author, / who tells Moses, of himself speaking: / "I will show you every value"».

the first printer to enjoy such rights having obtained in 1497 a ruling by Venice Republic granting him the exclusive right to print Ariosto's poems. In following centuries there will be authors obtaining similar privileges in first person, like Rabelais, but they would be exceptions. In fact, the basis of copyright, namely the distinction between the physical object (the book) and the "work", is mostly ignored for centuries even after the invention of the technical reproducibility of the literary work. The owner of the object (book) owns also of what is written on it and can do with it what he wants, for example print it again or copy it, except for an explicit sovereign privilege. The first theorist who made this difference was Immanuel Kant in a small essay of 1785 entitled *The illegality of counterfeiting of books*.

After the Enlightenment and the establishment of bourgeois society, with its strong ethic of work, literature becomes institution, writing (or painting, composing music etc.) becomes a work without ceasing to be "creation", and the author finds protection and social role. It is a period that lasts just over a century, until the advent of the cultural industry, which, due to productive and economic necessity, practices forms of collective authorship, while in some cases maintaining the ideology of "creation". But this ideology is less and less aware of itself and less demanding on the theoretical level. Gradually, the author's qualification extends to every productive activity and the theological notion of "creation" becomes trivialized in the advertising one of "creativity". Anyone can be an author, but above all anyone must be creative: the tailor and the cook, the craftsman and the journalist, the gardener and the barman. The relationship with the divine, however, passes from the figure of the author to that of the interpreter. It is the actors, the musical performers, the models that become "stars", or, as some language prefer "godlike". All this story and sociology of the social presence of the author, and the many details that could and should be added here, however, do not concern the existence of the author, but his cultural consideration, the way in which the different societies have thought of a role that in itself has always existed.

3.

This is where Barthes's analysis intervenes, arguing not against the theological remains of authorship, and not even against the ambiguous notion of "creativity" but against the individual character of authorship, the idea that there is a personal relationship between author and text.

Barthes struggles to replace it, this author as productive and explanatory principle of literature, with impersonal and anonymous language.

Un texte est fait d'écritures multiples, issues de plusieurs cultures et qui entrent les unes avec les autres en dialogue, en parodie, en contestation ; mais il y a un lieu où cette multiplicité se rassemble, et ce lieu, ce n'est pas l'auteur, comme on l'a dit jusqu'à présent, c'est le lecteur [...] l'écriture est la destruction de toute voix, de toute origine [...] un texte n'est pas fait d'une ligne de mots, dégageant un sens unique, en quelque sorte théologique (qui serait le "message" de l'Auteur-Dieu), mais un espace à dimensions multiples, où se marient et se contestant des écritures variées, dont aucune n'est originelle: le texte est un tissu de citations, issues des mille foyers de la culture. [...] Donner un Auteur à un texte, c'est imposer à ce texte un cran d'arrêt, c'est le pouvoir d'un signifié dernier, c'est fermer l'écriture.⁷

The author, according to Barthes, is replaced by the *scripteur*, ie the copyist, whose only power is that of «mêler les écritures, de les contrarier les unes par les autres, de façon à jamais prendre appui sur l'une d'elles»⁸. Precisely the opposition between *écrivain*, which in the article is synonymous with *auteur*, and the *scripteur* plays a fundamental role in understanding the autonomous and trans-historical character of the literary language to which Barthes submits all the activities produced around literature.

7. «A text is made of multiple writings, coming from many cultures and entering into dialogue, parody, contestation; but there is a place where this multiplicity comes together, and this place is not the author, as we have said so far, it is the reader [...] writing is the destruction of every voice, of every origin [...] a text is not made of a line of words, giving off a unique sense, somehow theological (which would be the "message" of the Author-God), but a space with multiple dimensions, where marry and disputing various writings, none of which is original: the text is a tissue of quotations from the thousand homes of culture. [...] To give an author to a text is to impose on this text a deterrent, it is to provide it with a last signified, it is to close the writing».

8. «To mix the writings, to annoy them one by the other, so as to ever rely on one of them».

First of all, Barthes' theory on the "death of the author" shows the pretension to be an empirical statement: nowadays, in the bourgeois world, there were authors, he says, but now there is no such an entity. Or... maybe it never existed, not even in the example form what the article of Barthes takes its beginning: a short fragment of one of the most bourgeois writers of the French literature, Balzac's novel *Sarrazine*, where a certain "psychological" evaluation of a character is given. Barthes declares himself unable to understand who is uttering this judgment:

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.

Let me say: this is a bad (or rather: a rhetoric) question; hence there is no right answer to it. After Bakhtin we know that in many novels there is polyphony; after Genette that there are different degrees of distance and presence of the Author/Narrator in the story. Semiotics tell us that never the Narrator (which is always a function of the text, which can be more or less personalized) should be confused with the empirical Author. Almost every description, every psychological characterization, every perception of events in all literary texts it is characterized by the same uncertainty; it is almost never possible to say whether the judgment is of a character, of the narrator, of the author, of his Encyclopedia. This is the rule of the game of diegesis, as opposed to mimesis, according to a theorization that goes back to Aristotle (*Poetics*, 3.1448a, pp. 21–2). In the diegetic form of narrative there is a programmatic ambiguity between narrating voice, author,

characters, bystanders, which in mimesis, for example in theater and in painting, is missing. On stage only the characters speak and the author has no word; in each narration, instead, the tone of the narrator's voice, identified or not with a character or with the author, is always present. This is not an argument neither for nor against the existence of the author, it is a necessary feature of third person narrative form. Except when some narrative devices of detachment is acting — a circumstance that is always possible, as when Leporello says «Signor, il padron mio. . . / badate ben. . . non io. . . / vorria con voi cenar. . .»⁹, the text is always ultimately taken over by the Narrator.

Barthes could not be unaware of such a basic feature of every narration and therefore here its mention is just instrumental and specious. The problem is not to know if a certain expression of the text “belongs” to the Narrator or to the Author, to a character or to the general Encyclopedia. It must always be attributed to “the Narrator”, even if this expression “betrays” the author's personal opinions or refers to the current ideology or to certain literary stereotypes or even if it in some way exudes from a character. In every narration there is always the Narrator, if only as an implicit anchor of the adopted point of view. The Narrator is part of the structural characteristics of every story, even in “authorless” narratives, as the existence of a purpose within the story, of the one who pursues it, of its obstacles, etc. A text without Narrator, even if it is implicit and not figurativized, is not a story.

Furthermore the indisputable fact that behind a text there is always an empirical author, or more than one, of which identity we may or may not have knowledge, depends on a very general feature of the world. That is, from the fact that texts are constructed objects. And of course all the artifacts or constructed objects are works of people (usually human beings but we can also imagine that they are gods, animals, angels, extraterrestrials builders or in this case authors). Those who build those particular works that are the texts are defined authors. It does not matter if we know them or not, if we can identify parts of the text with their beliefs or if we think that what is written in the text does not correspond to the “true” thoughts of the author.

9. *Don Giovanni*, Act 2, xi: «Sir, my owner. . . / mind you well. . . not me. . . / would like to have dinner with you. . .».

This is a problem of criticism or biography, but from the point of view of the theory of communication this question and also the inability to answer cannot delete the fact of the existence of the author.

Perhaps in order to avoid having to give his justification in front of these obvious questions, which could reveal so weak and dogmatic a position that it obliges us to think of the explanation of Leo Strauss, Barthes quickly goes on to examine the historical question of the author. But also the historical approach of this text is very poor. Let us read some lines:

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 the result of capitalist ideology, which has accorded the greatest importance to the author's "person".

It is a very arbitrary reconstruction that ignores important historical facts. I have already provided elements that contradict this scheme, but it is worth mentioning a couple more: What about Augustin *Confessions*? Or Dante Alighieri's *Commedia* interlacement between life and work? It would be superfluous (and boring) to continue the analysis of this text in detail. Just I want to show his conclusions:

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.

Has "the" Reader now to be born? Really? Needs he to be protected against the Author? At the price of the "death" of this last figure? This is too fanciful and arrogant a conclusion to be taken seriously. And in fact the article of Barthes is just seven pages, it was no expanded nor even republished in a book until the death not of some abstract figure of Author, but of its empirical author Roland Barthes. This one did not bother even of reconsidering his problem with Balzac while, three years after this paper, he analyzed the same novel in a whole book,

SZ, with very different analytical tools and also results. We should conclude that Barthes "Death of the Author" is just an intellectual provocation, a stance in favor of the experimental literature of those years, similar to what we read in the just as weak and contradictory distinction between "pleasure" and "enjoyment" in *The Pleasure of the Text*.

Or rather it should be read as a philosophical and political stance against the individual responsibility and autonomy that are implicit in the notion of author. The main (and in my opinion very superficial) idea here is that the "author" is essentially a "bourgeois" figure and that the (post)modernity is the occasion for destroying it together with all the "bourgeois ideology". The first and more original supporter of this idea was Walter Benjamin, who, thirty years before Barthes (1936), claimed that mechanical reproduction of art was a good thing above all because it constituted the technical condition capable of abolishing the "aura" of artwork (and therefore the charismatic figure of the author) with the militant presence of the masses, as was the case (in his opinion) for Soviet cinema.

I cannot elaborate this point, but there are clues in the same direction also for the second main source for this "death of the author", the more serious essay of Michel Foucault *What is an author?* (1969). Foucault is interested in the author as a "function" and in the production/proliferation of sense:

The author is not an indefinite source of significations that fill a work; the author does not precede the works; he is a certain functional principle by which, in our culture, one limits, excludes, and chooses; in short, by which one impedes the free circulation, the free manipulation, the free composition, decomposition, and recomposition of fiction. In fact, if we are accustomed to presenting the author as a genius, as a perpetual surging of invention, it is because, in reality, we make him function in exactly the opposite fashion. One can say that the author is an ideological product, since we represent him as the opposite of his historically real function. When a historically given function is represented in a figure that inserts it, one has an ideological production. The author is therefore the ideological figure by which one marks the manner in which we fear the proliferation of meaning.

These ideas are not isolated in Foucault's production. For instance he writes that the author is «the superficial effect of larger units» (1969b, p. 36). And referring to himself: «Do not ask me who I am

and do not ask me to stay the same: it's a civil status morality; reigns on our documents. Leave us at least free when it comes to writing» (1969a p. 20). The author for Foucault is therefore:

- the person responsible for the speech (i.e. legally punishable, expressing property);
- the guarantor of sense (for knowledge of tradition or for divine inspiration, expressing credibility);
- the designer of a speech (coherent in style and ideas, expressing constancy in value and unity of style);
- the bearer of a simulation of different subjects who talk at the same time (the one who does the job, the one who in the work takes a shared position, the one who tells the same work inside other past and future works).

Foucault, less provocative, but in a much ideological and subversive way, has in common with Barthes the idea of a link between authorship and “humanism”. Foucault and Barthes are both against the author because it is a principle of responsibility (also in theoretical Jonas sense) and their political objective is overthrow not just “capitalism” but in a much wider sense humanism, or the principle of individual responsibility, which is one of its important prerequisites. There is a source for this move: it is Heidegger, who was much popular in France at this time. The reference goes to his “Letter on humanism” but also to “On the way to language”. Barthes writes: «for Mallarmé, as for us, it is language which speaks, not the author». This is clearly an open quotation of Heidegger (1959):

Language speaks. What about its speaking? Where do we encounter such speaking? Most likely, to be sure, in what is spoken. For here speech has come to completion in what is spoken. The speaking does not cease in what is spoken. Speaking is kept safe in what is spoken. In what is spoken, speaking gathers the ways in which it persists as well as that which persists by it—its persistence, its presencing. But most often, and too often, we encounter what is spoken only as the residue of a speaking long past.

This is not the occasion of deepening this relation between post-modernism and the anti-humanistic ideology of Heidegger and other intellectual supporters of Nazism. For performing this task, it should

be necessary considering other points of contact, for instance the figure of Paul De Man. But it is clear enough here that the theory of the “Death of the Author” is not a literary or communication empirical theory; it is something much more self referential and ideological. Postmodernism is not interested in discovering how literary, artistic and general communication text really work. What is called “theory” in the United States and in the cultural periphery of it, is just a self centered discourse, used as a rhetorical device for challenging the tradition of humanism, more than to understand literature.

This idea of theory as a device for subverting the humanistic tradition of Europe naturally entails the other ideas of postmodernism: absence of an autonomous meaning of the work and forced interpretations of literature, art etc., in order to expose its secret oppressive (namely patriarchal, colonialist, classist, homophobic, etc.) character. It intends to use the instruments of the critic as weapons for deconstructing the European political and cultural tradition of liberal thought. Deconstructionism is of course indifferent to a fair lecture of texts. It was not invented by Derrida, but by Heidegger and it has always been a political weapon. The result of this push are the so called “cultural studies”. In the definition of these disciplines is included the programmatic engagement to exclude any form of objectivity requirement, replacing it with a melting of writing and militancy, academia and political commitment

Italian semiotics, and in general semiotics does not belong to this “theory”. As general semiotics it thinks itself as a part of philosophical epistemology; as applied semiotics as empirical research characterized by a “scientific vocation” as Greimas used to tell. The semiotic who felt more the duty of confronting the degeneration of this “Theory” was Umberto Eco, maybe also because his experience as an author. There are three books of Eco about this point: *Lector in fabula* (1979), *I limiti dell’interpretazione* (1990), *Interpretation and Overinterpretation* (1992). Let me quote some line from this last book (p. 24):

To say that interpretation (as the basic feature of semiosis) is potentially unlimited does not mean that interpretation has no object [...]. Some contemporary theories of criticism assert that the only reliable reading of a text is a misreading, that the only existence of a text is given by the chain of responses it elicits, and that, as maliciously suggested by Tzvetan Todorov (quoting Georg Christoph Lichtenberg apropos of Jakob Boehme), a text is only a picnic where

the author brings the words and the reader brings the sense. Even if that were true, the words brought by the author are a rather embarrassing bunch of material evidences that the reader cannot pass over in silence, or in noise. If I remember correctly, it was in this country [England] that somebody suggested, years ago, that it is possible to do things with words. To interpret a text means to explain why these words can do various things (and not others) through the way they are interpreted. But if Jack the Ripper told us that he did what he did on the grounds of his interpretation of the Gospel according to Saint Luke, I suspect that many reader-oriented critics would be inclined to think that he read Saint Luke in a pretty preposterous way.

It may seem that the author's theme is secondary. After all, Barthes and Foucault do not deny that in fact a certain person has written *Hamlet* or the *Divine Comedy*, they limit themselves to arguing against its unity or uniqueness and against the link that the work would maintain with these composers, rejecting a paradigm that we could call the "intentionality" of the work. An intentionality that must be understood in a complex manner, as Umberto Eco has already shown, and which is even more problematic in contemporary digital society (Leone 2018).

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