

ROLAND BARTHES “THE DEATH OF THE AUTHOR”

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Abstract

The Present paper on the essay, “Death of the Author” mainly addresses the power of the author in reading and analyzing writing, and the power of the reader or listener and the option to more or less ignore the work’s background and focus more on the work itself.

Keywords: Reader, Writer

INTRODUCTION

Roland Barthes is a French literary critic and theorist. The essay, “The Death of the Author”, written in 1967 and published in 1968, is a stance against the enclosure of Structuralism and the authority of formalism. The Essay makes sense in the context of the intellectual life of Paris; it has been misinterpreted when it was removed from the transitional context of theory passing out of Structuralism into Post-Structuralism as a reaction to the events of May 1968. In this essay, Barthes revolutionized the field of criticism. In a way he argues against the method of criticism that relies on the authors identity – political views, historical contexts, religion, ethnicity, psychology or personal attributes.

“THE DEATH OF THE AUTHOR”: AN ANALYSIS

The “Death of the Author” is an extension of the end of the unified subject, and as such, Barthes was expressing the prevailing intellectual stance that was being written and would be expressed among that group of thinkers who were attending the seminars of Jacques Lacan in Paris. If the subject is dissolved into language, then so too the fiction of the author or the independent creator of a work of art. Moreover, from a Marxist perspective, the “author” is a modern invention, derived from capitalist ideology that granted importance to the author’s person that was part of the wider system of ownership, property and privilege. “The Author” is part of capitalist stress on control through authority. He is also part of the enlightenment stress on individuality that inversely prioritized expertise and uniqueness. An explanation for the work of art would be sought in the person of the producer, his tastes, his history and his passions. In addition it is possible to locate an “origin” for the Romanticism and the stress on the significance of subjectivity.

Barthes wanted only to extend and interpretation of the work of art to include the interaction of other texts and the responses of the reader. The German School of Constance will take up this notion of the active reader and develop the role of the reader into “reader-response” criticism and the impact of plural readings upon the acts of interpretation. “The Death of the Author” puts forward a series of ideas far more important than whether or not the Author is “dead”. It is her that Barthes would write of the concept of “intertextuality”.

In Writing Degree Zero (1953), the goal was a neutral and blank language that used words in a material and concrete manner that freed them from social codes. For Barthes, as he had mentioned several times before, it was the nineteenth century poet Stephane Mallarme who understood that language speaks, not the author. In his famous poem “Un coup de des”, Mallarme explained the importance of the gaps between the words that rattled across the white pages like a die rolling across a casino table: “the ensuring words lie out as they are, lead on the last, with no novelty except the spacing of the text. The ‘blanks’ indeed take on importance, at first glance; the versification demands them, as a surrounding silence, to the extent that a fragment, lyrical or of a few beats, occupies, in its midst, a third of the space of paper: I do not transgress the measure, only disperse it”. In other words, Mallarme equated words with silence or gaps, emphasizing the materiality of language and the nature of reading.

And then, several decades later, came Surrealism. Due to the use of psychological games, such as automatic writing, it was Surrealism; Barthes said that “helped desacralize the image of the Author”. After a process of questing and slow unraveling, from a Structuralist perspective, the author’s only tool is language itself and

therefore trapped in language, authorship is never personal and the author is secondary to language. Compared to the strong pseudo “presence” of the author, writing is neuter and plural, a site of the loss of the subject and of identity. Because, post-enlightenment philosophy challenged the notion of the Cartesian subject, writing is the destruction of every voice and ever origin. When one recounts or writes or represents, Barthes noted, a gap appears and the voice loses its “origin”.

On account of the, withdrawal of the author, Barthes wrote, “utterly transforms the modern text” and time is also transformed. When the author is “present”, there is the before and after writing time, when writing begins, the author enters into his or her own death. In order to write, one must utilize language, and language, as Lacan asserted, “Speaks the subject”. The reader or “the scriptor is born at the same time as his text and every text is written essentially here and now” (168). Therefore “writing” changed from an act of recording or representation to a performance, which Barthes christened as “performative”. The term “scriptor” is then linked to “a pure gesture of inscription” (168) which “traces a field without origin”. Barthes elaborated when he stated that the text was “a multi-dimensional space in which are married and contested several writings, none of which is original: the text is fabric of quotations, resulting from a thousand sources of culture”. Therefore, certain consequences occur: first, the book itself is but a tissue of signs, endless imitation, infinitely and postponed” and it is “futile” to attempt to “decipher” a text.

By the beginning of the 20th century, the idea of the unified subject came under question through Lacan’s re-reading of Freud through the filter of semiotics in the fifties, and in the sixties semiotics gave way to Structuralism with Roland Barthes as its major spokesperson. If language speaks the subject, then there can be no pure gesture of inscription. The character Barthes referred to as the “modern scriptor” buried the romantic notion of the Author. The writing has become detached from the voice and writes traces without origin. Therefore, according to Barthes, “the writer can only imitate an ever anterior, never original gesture; his sole power is to mingle writings”.

To impose as Author upon a text is to impose a brake on interpretation, to give the work a final signified. Writing becomes closed. The “author” becomes a component of reading, a theoretical designation, a fiction employed for the sake of discursive convenience. Over the years, Barthes built a case that work could be only of its own time but that in order to exist art was a composite. But as the end of the essay indicated, the death of the author does not mean the demise of the writer and points instead to the agency of the reader in bringing meanings to a text. The reader and the writer co-create a text that in itself cannot be singular as a ‘work’, but is inherently intertextual, that is, a “text” rather than a “work”. The total being of writing is multiple writings that are engaged in a dialogue. Writing is where multiplicity is collected, not by the author, but by the reader. In a way, the unity of the text is not its origin but its destination.

So the author must die in order to allow a space for the reader. It is the reader, after all, who makes meaning. The reader can never get outside of the language any more than the author is an original author and go beyond known language. Barthes took up the question of the breakdown of the boundaries of the “work” into the “text” which has no bounds in his essay “From Work to Text”. At the time he was writing, the old disciplines were breaking down in favor of the trend towards the interdisciplinary, a mixing of fields and professions. Barthes refers to the breakdown of old disciplines as a “mutation” that is part of an “epistemological shift”. A new objectless object and a new language were formed, as “work” evolved into text, which is located at the intersection of author and reader. Barthes borrowed a distinction from Lacan: “reality” is shown, but “real” is proved. Therefore the text must not be understood as “a computable object” but as “a methodological field”.

The work is seen, “held in the hand”, while the text is demonstrated, “held in language” and exists only when caught up in language. Text is experienced only as an activity in production. The text is “constitutive movement” and cannot stop at “literature” which is formally interpreted. The text is plural and fulfills the plurality of meaning and depends upon dissemination which Barthes described as “transversal”, and he even emphasized, “Text is experienced only in an activity, in a production”. The author cannot be returned except as a guest because the text is a network, a combinative operation. The text is play, task, production and practices, meaning that reading and writing are linked together in the same signifying practice. The pleasure of the text is that text is a social space where languages circulate, because” the theory of the text can coincide only with a practice of reading”.

Barthes criticized Structuralism for setting up a meta-language to critique language, claiming that a meta-language is a linguistic impossibility, for one can never escape the effects of language. In explaining that the text is ‘plural’, Barthes presented an early explanation of ‘intertextuality’. He who defined intertextuality and wrote in his characteristic run-on fashion: the intertextual in which every text is held, it itself being the text between of another text, is not to be confused with some origin to the text; to try to find the ‘sources’, the ‘influences’ of work, is to fall in with the myth of filiations; the citations which go to make up a text are anonymous, untraceable and yet already read: they are quotations without inverted commas.

Many of Barthes’s works focus on literature. However, Barthes denied being a literary critic, because he did not assess and provide verdicts on works. Instead, he interpreted their semiotic significance. Barthes’s structuralist style of literary analysis has influenced cultural studies, to chagrin of adherents of traditional literary approaches. One notable point of controversy is Barthes’s proclamation of the death of the author. This ‘death’ is directed, not at the idea of writing, but at the specifically French image of the auteur as a creative genius

expressing an inner vision. He is opposing a view of text as expressing a distinct personality of the author. Barthes also vehemently opposes the view that authors consciously create masterpieces. He maintains authors such as Racine and Balzac often reproduce emotional patterns about which they have no conscious knowledge. Furthermore through the end of the essay, he opposes the view that authors should be interpreted in terms of what they think they are doing.

A CRITICAL ANALYSIS ON “THE DEATH OF THE AUTHOR”

The essay, “Death of the Author” mainly addresses the power of the author in reading and analyzing writing, and the power of the reader or listener and the option to more or less ignore the work’s background and focus more on the work itself. When critically viewing writing, “the author, his person, his life, his tastes, and his passions” (Barthes 383) takes the spotlight; the author is forced to take sole responsibility of the failure or success of the work. Barthes goes on to discuss the text itself appearing as derivative, extracted from other works due to the “innumerable centers of culture” (385). The direct intent of the author may be muddled due to the translation from author to text to reader, the text ending up more of an “immense dictionary” (385) than anything else. The inability of text to truly capture the “passions, humors, feelings, impressions” (385) of the author are “lost, infinitely deferred” (385) due to the subjectivity of the reader. Barthes leads to the main point that the reader holds more responsibility to the text than the author. The complexity of different connotations and experiences that come from the author into the text are flattened when it arrives to the reader. The reader comes empty handed and is completely impersonalized with the text. It is as if a sculpture, a three dimensional work, is photographed, and reduced to two dimensions. So much information is condensed and made inaccessible to the viewer. Furthermore, Barthes makes the point that the origin of a work may lie with the author, but its destination is with the reader. That is, “The birth of the reader must be at the cost of the death of the author”.

CONCLUSION

Thus to conclude, in “The Death of the Author”, Barthes argues that writing destroys every voice and point of origin, this is because it occurs within a functional process which is the practice of signification itself. Its real origin is language. A writer, therefore, does not have a special genius expressed in the text, but rather, is a kind of craftsman who is killed in using a particular code. He finally ends up the essay saying, all writers are like copy writers or scribes, inscribing a particular zone of language. In a sense he says, the real origin of a text is not the author, but language. Moreover he insists that the death of the author creates freedom for the reader to interpret the text, so that, the reader can recreate the text through connecting to its meanings as they appear in different contexts.

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