

De Auctore (2)

This paper continues to explore the manner in which history inscribes the idea of the author (see also our “De auctore (1)”, in Ovidius University Annals of Philology, vol. XVII, 2006, pp. 173-197) by critically reading a number of theoretical formulations of authorship from Romanticism to Postmodernism. Our aim has been to appropriate its system of rules, to identify the main defining elements and to put present assumptions about the author in their true perspective.

Key words: *author, ‘death of the author’, genius, intentio auctoris*

The Author as Sacred

Ancillary to an exaltation of art as supreme value, by displacing the center of literature to the individual self and by making of the true artist “le prêtre de cette religion éternelle” (Bénichou 422-423), Romanticism instituted the modern notion of the author. The Romantic writer regains the sacred powers of imagination and memory that had once been the attributes of the Homeric rhapsode. The moment is placed by Bell-Villada around 1830, when, in the name of “pure art”, bohemia changed from an art style into a life style (4). Pierre Bourdieu however relates it to the decisive contribution of Gustave Flaubert and Charles Baudelaire, and locates it later, about 1850, when a ‘cultural revolution’ was fomented, and literature, conscious of itself, claimed the “right to define for itself the principles of its legitimacy” with respect to economical or social factors (61).

Vital to the Romantic world picture is the idea that the writer is “un être rare et privilégié” (Bénichou 422); in the exercise of his imaginative powers he is capable of creating something absolutely new, unique, in other words, original, and can thus break altogether with the conditions of his existence. First outlined in Edward Young’s *Conjectures on Original Composition* (1759), this new way of thinking about writing was elaborated upon by a large number of writers from Herder and Kant (*Critique of Judgment*) to Coleridge and Wordsworth, who claimed in his “Essay, Supplementary to the Preface”:

Of genius the only proof is, the act of doing well what is worthy to be done, and what was never done before: Of genius, in the fine arts, the only infallible sign is the widening the sphere of human sensibility, for the delight, honor, and benefit of human nature. Genius is the introduction of a new element into the intellectual universe: or, if that be not allowed, it is the application of

powers to objects on which they had not before been exercised, or the employment of them in such a manner as to produce effects hitherto unknown. (*Poetical Works* 750)

Romantics fervently believed in the uniqueness and the inviolability of the poet (writer), which they turned into a *Weltanschauung*. In Carlyle's apotheosis, *On Heroes, Hero-Worship and the Heroic in History* (1840), the writer, an uncommonly endowed, exalted personality, places himself above mankind and thus distinguishes himself "from multitudes of false unheroic". Alienated from the world, he is answerable to his newly achieved spiritual power, i.e., genius only: "Great Soul living apart in that anomalous manner; endeavoring to speak forth the inspiration that was in him by Printed Books, and find place and subsistence by what the world would please to give him for doing that." He is (divinely) inspired, a notion which signifies originality, sincerity and genius (Carlyle 171-173). Writers became the heroes, the prophets, and the priests of the day:

La philosophie des lumières avait sacré l'Homme de Lettres, penseur et publiciste. Le spiritualisme du XIXe siècle sacré le Poète. Ce second type, qui suppose une inspiration d'en haut, plutôt que le déploiement de clartés purement humaines, et qui fait, a quelque degré, appel au mystère des choses et a leur nature ineffable, a d'abord été célèbre sur un mode contre-révolutionnaire, en opposition au Philosophe et pour le supplanter... le type dominant fut alors le Poète-Penseur : un inspire porteur de lumières modernes en même temps que de mystère, montrant aux hommes, en les accompagnant dans leur marche, un but distant et pur. .. Le Poète-penseur garantissait a al fois la régénération finale et son accomplissement sans violences ni haines. (Bénichou 469-470)

The Romantic writer speaks through his creation: the attributes that had been God's by tradition, are now his (Abrams, *Naturalism* 89-90). In Wordsworth's own words:

I had a world about me; 'twas my own,
I made it; for it only liv'd to me,
And to the God who look'd into my mind.

(*The Prelude*, Book 3, 140-143)

The text, therefore, can be judged only in relation to the author, it is the expression of its author. The individual and the author are merged into one, and "[b]iography assumed mythical value" (Peyre 120). Hence the Romantics' propensity toward autobiography. In his seminal book *The Mirror and the Lamp*, noticing how Augustinian *Confessions* reverberate through Romantic autobiography, M. H. Abrams, comments that "[t]he self is no longer, as it was with Augustine, "authorized", the self is *author*" (54). Although mysterious and elusive, the self remains the privileged, if not the only source of truth, the very repository of meaning. Explanation through the work and personality, in other words, literary biography mushroomed. Using the method of history, typically illustrated by Saint-Beuve -- *Portraits littéraires* (1862) -- the critic analyses the poet's life to clarify his work, or his' work to shed light on his life. With the Romantics, the relationship between the text and the author remains "the solid and fundamental unit": positioned outside the text, and preceding it, the author is

the figure the text always points to, “marks off its edges” and “characterizes its mode of being”, i.e. aesthetic (Foucault 174, 179).

2. The ‘Death of the Author’

The Romantic notion of the author raised the challenge of both writers and critics, whose reaction against the tyranny of subjectivity, commitment, engagement, and involvement, variously translated as impartiality, impassibility, neutrality, objectivity, finally as the illocutory effacement of the author. As Gustave Flaubert (“Letter to Louise Colette”, December 9, 1852) carefully words it, “[l]’auteur dans son oeuvre, doit être comme Dieu dans l’univers, présent partout et visible nulle part” (*Correspondence* 204).

Stephane Mallarmé firmly believes in the force of poetry of forging a symbolic reality of its own, and asks that the poet should free himself from the formula of personality and completely efface from the text, through a long and strenuous asceticism: “If the poem is to be pure, the poet’s voice must be stilled and the initiative taken by the words themselves, which will be set in motion as they meet unequally in collision. And in an exchange of gleams they will flame out like some glittering swath of fire sweeping over-precious stones, and thus replace the audible breathing in lyric poetry of old—replace the poet’s own personal and passionate control of verse” (“Crisis in Poetry”, 40-41). The French poet goes as far to say in an article -- “The Book: A Spiritual” -- that “all earthly existence must ultimately be contained in a book” (24).

The notion of the author as a unified self was questioned by Marcel Proust among others. In *Contre Saint Beuve* (1909), pronouncing on a hiatus between man and author, the French writer claims that “... a book is the product of different *self* from the self we manifest in our habits, in our social life, in our vice” (99-100) It is a self located deep inside us, which we can reach by re-creating it: “If we would try to understand that particular self, it is by searching our own bosoms, and trying to reconstruct it there, that we may arrive at it” (100).

T. S. Eliot’s memorable formula from “Tradition and Individual Talent” (1920): “Poetry is not a turning loose of emotion, but an escape from emotion; it is not the expression of personality, but an escape from personality” (*The New Criticism* 300), echoes a similar anti-Romantic attitude.

As early as 1931, Roman Ingarden uncompromisingly states in his influential study *The Literary Work of Art*: “the author, with all his vicissitudes, experiences, and psychic states, remains completely outside the literary work” (22).

For Wimsatt and Beardsley (1954), the term ‘author’ as a concept through which to read and understand literature has lost its salience and validity. The representatives of New Criticism speak of the attempt to find the author in the work, or the work through the author, as the ‘intentional fallacy’. Though retaining the notion of authorial presence, of literary works as organized wholes, with some determinate meaning, they claim that the meaning intended by the author is not the only, and perhaps not the most important meaning of the work. The reader must concentrate on the text instead, and explore its meanings through the organic structure of the text (750).

Dismantling Romantic aesthetics, Maurice Blanchot argues in *The Literary Space* (1955), that to write is to submit to an endless exhaustion, an continuous dissolution of the “I”: the writer loses his own identity in the anonymity and non-presence of ‘literary space’, he

“belongs to a language which no one speaks, which is addressed to no one, which has no center, and which reveals nothing. He may believe that he affirms himself in this language, but what he affirms is altogether deprived of self. To the extent that, being a writer, he does justice to what requires writing, he can never again express himself, any more than he can appeal to you, or even introduce another's speech. Where he is, only being speaks -- which means that language doesn't speak any more, but is. It devotes itself to the pure passivity of being” (26-27).

From the literary field, the “assault on the poet” moved into other areas. Rather than a discursive practice, poetry is a letting go of language, an idea concentrated in the famous heideggerian phrase: “language speaks man”. Language for Heidegger is that locus where Being comes to place: it is the lighting and advent of Being itself (*Being and Time*, section 34 “Being-there and Discourse. Language”, 202-210).

That the author as producer and explainer of texts is substituted by impersonal, anonymous language as exclusive matter for literature, is also claimed by the Avant-garde and, finally by Roland Barthes. In his landmark essay “The Death of the Author” (1968), Barthes points out that an author does not exist prior to or outside of language: “the modern *scriptor* is born simultaneously with the text, is in no way equipped with a being preceding or exceeding the writing, is not the subject with the book as predicate.” (149). The author cannot claim any absolute authority over his text because, in some ways, he did not write it. The modern literary work was granted the right to ‘kill’ its author: “Writing means the destruction of every voice, of every point of origin. . . . “As soon as a fact is narrated - no longer with a view to acting directly on reality but intransitively, the disconnection occurs - the voice loses its origin, the author enters his own death and writing begins” (147). The author is never more than the instance writing: the “I” in a text is a single instance of saying “I”; it denotes a subject (a syntactic position) rather than an individual, a person (cf. Emile Benveniste's theory exposed in “Subjectivity in Language”, 1958). Its referent is irrelevant, and inaccessible to comprehending its function and meaning in the writing. Nor is Barthes' choice of a scholastic term, ‘scriptor’ which reminds us of Bonaventura's distinctions, inconsequential, for it precisely portrays the condition of the modern writer: “Similar to Bouvard and Pécuchet, those eternal copyists, at once sublime and comic and whose profound ridiculousness indicates precisely the truth of writing, the writer can only imitate a gesture that is always anterior, never original. His only power is to mix writings, to counter the ones with the others, in such a way as never to rest on any one of them (149). For Barthes, the removal of the author brings with it the concomitant demise of the text as understood as a literary convention, i.e., work. Notions of like unity, coherence, even plot, all fall away (148). The idea of a determinate, ‘theological’ meaning must also be forsaken. Any text is necessarily intertextual, dialogic: “a multi-dimensional space in which a variety of writings, none of them original, blend and clash. . . . a tissue of quotations drawn from the innumerable centers of culture”, which can be detected, but not solved (149). The literariness of a text seems to consist in its opening to a variety of possible interpretations. The recourse to the author, the determination of an origin, reducing the plurality of voices to one, favoring one meaning at the expense of another, can be only an interpretative hypothesis: “[t]o give a text an Author is to impose a limit on that text, to furnish it with a final signified, to close the writing. (149) Analysis needs to explore the multiplicity of writing - everything is to be ‘disentangled rather than deciphered’. The unity of a text is to be found in its destination - the reader; though the reader too is inscribed, not personal. That is why the birth of reader begins

with the death of the author. The essay ends with a vision, open to argument, of a culture in which literature would circulate anonymously.

Jacques Derrida's critique of writing (*écriture*) as absence (*De la grammatologie / On Grammatology* (1967), acknowledges the shift in meaning in all forms of communication and signification, whereby meaning is both based on differences and infinitely deferred as a never simply present event. The author is never a fully present entity, but leaves his traces throughout the text. Derrida's trace is the mark of the lack of the origin that is the condition of thought and experience: "The traces", writes he, "is not only the disappearance of origin it means that the origin did not even disappear, that it was never constituted except reciprocally by a non-origin, the trace which thus becomes the origin of the origin." (61) Texts subvert, exceed, or even overturn their author's stated intention. Introducing the term *textuality*, he challenges the opposition text/author by asserting the independence of the text. Such a reading, in effect, bestows on the reader the role of creator of meaning which might formally have been thought of as the function of the author. Meaning is no longer unique but multiple or even infinite.

In "What is An Author?" (1968), Michel Foucault elaborates on a further distinction within the author function: that of "founders of discursivity", illustrated by such examples as Marx of Freud. The discourse which the founders of discursivity make possible is, open-ended and involves multiple points of continuation, rupture, diversion, and dissemination. Foucault distinguishes the author function in the founders of discursivity from the way it operates in literature and science precisely on this issue of the possibility of continuation through critical difference (*Modern Criticism and Theory*, 183-185). Although he warns against aligning this type of author with the canonical or "great" authors of literature, philosophy, etc., the possibility of the literary text extending its influence beyond its margins seems to open new areas of research.

3. The 'Resurrection' of the Author

The notion of the "defacement of the author" ultimately failed to avoid the redemptive tradition to which literature belongs since Romanticism. The formalist/structuralist fetishism of writing and work, and the Derridean notion of *écriture*, Foucault argues in the same essay, paradoxically preserve the idea of the author, by simply transposing "the empirical characteristics of the author into a transcendental anonymity" (176). Earlier, Wane C. Booth (*The Rhetoric of Fiction*, 1961) had made the astute observation that "...the author can, to a certain extent, choose to disguise himself, but he can never choose to disappear" (20). Invoking a "tacit contract" between the reader and the novelist, "granting him the right to know what he is writing about", the American critic claims this is fundamental to our experience of fiction. "... all art, say he, presupposes the artist's choice" (52-53). The work creates an image of the writer, which Booth calls the "implied writer".

In the best tradition of phenomenological hermeneutics, Paul Ricoeur, suggests in "What Is a Text?" that the author is radically disengaged from the interpretive process, that "the book divides the act of writing and the act of reading into two sides, between which there is no communication. . . the writer is absent from the act of reading" (45). Although this 'emancipation' of the text from the speaking situation, affects its referential relations to the world and various subjectivities connected to it--these are 'suspended', yet not suppressed--

Ricoeur does not believe in the 'ideology of the absolute text'. The absence of the writers allows for a complex relation of the author to the text to be established, "a relation which enables us to say that the author is instituted by the text, which he stands in the space of meaning traced and inscribed by writing. The text is the very place where the author appears" (47-48). Taking over a formula from Hans-Georg Gadamer's *Method and Truth* (1960), Ricoeur re-interprets the splitting of the speaker, which, following Benveniste, structuralists and post-structuralists have taken as the mark of the disappearance of the author, as the very sign of "the irruption of the playful relation into the very subjectivity of the author": he "puts himself on stage and hence gives himself a representation" (92). The 'disappearance of the subject' is taken by the French philosopher as "an imaginative variation of the writer's ego". It consists in being part of the narrative, "in disguising oneself according to the narrative". The conclusion is self-evident: ". . . while it is true that the narrator is never the author, nevertheless the narrator is the one who is metamorphosed in a fictional character that is the author, even the death of the author is a game that the narrator plays (93).

In line with the phenomenology of reading, and with the observation made by Kate Hamburger in her epoch making *Logik der Dichtung / The Logic of Literature* (1957) that language in fictional narrative has a different kind of intentionality from 'historical statement', that narrative acts do not belong to speech acts, since they violate epistemological realism, i.e. they do not provide for an actual utterance-subject (45), the proponents of the "Deictic Shift Theory" (Duchan, Bruder, Shapiro, Hewitt, Rapaport, Segal *et al.*) restore the real author, for which shifters are the mark of his presence, as the creator of the text, in partnership with the real reader. A fictional work is always someone's creation, i.e., the author's, who constructs characters and sequences the events, communicates attitudes. All readers frame "a dynamic concept" of the author, as the only *origo* of all these, while reading, they construct an idea of the actual author and the relations between the author and the story world (Galbraith 51)

The appeal to text against the intention of the author, which some structuralist and post-structuralist approaches seem to favor, often calls upon an inherent criterion of coherence and complexity, which only the hypothesis of an intention may substantiate. Psychoanalytic investigation and Deconstructive criticism also need the notion of intention, because they intend to show what and how the text says in spite of itself. These critics depend on the meaning of the author which the text seems to subvert. The presupposition of intentionality seems to be, although not everyone agrees, a principle of literary studies.

The question of the hermeneutical place of the author is related to the dispute of the intention of the author, on the role this intention has in determining the meaning of the text. Two polemical theses on interpretation were opposed, which E. D. Hirsch, in *Validity in Interpretation* (1967) calls "intentionalist", the other "anti-intentionalist". One of the main arguments against *intentio auctoris* is that "the meaning of a text changes even for the author" (6), that the work outlives the intention(s) of the author. When someone writes, he intends to express something by means of the words he writes. But the relationship between the sequence of written words and what the author wanted to say by that sequence of words has nothing certain about it, and interpretation of it would proliferate infinitely. Were this true, Hirsch contends, there would be no possibility of discriminating between correct and incorrect interpretations since this implies some correspondence with a meaning represented in the text (10). To solve the problem, Hirsch draws a subtle distinction between the *significance* of the work, in other words, the author's relationship with the work's meaning,

which changes continuously, and its *meaning*, i.e., “that which is represented by the text”, “what the author meant by his use of a particular sign sequence”, which does not alter. (8)

Based on the notion of the self-sufficiency of language, that the meaning of a text is not determined by intention, but by the system of language, anti-intentionalists revive the old dichotomy between the artist and his work, and defend the semantic autonomy of the text: “it does not matter what an author means-only what his text says” (10). They make of the author’s exclusion the very starting point for interpretation. It is characteristic of the literary text, by contrast to the historical document, that its reality, its expressive power extend beyond its original historical horizon (Gadamer, *Philosophical Hermeneutics* 95). This suggests that the signification of a literary text would be better described as the sum of its successive interpretations. This logic, Hirsch argues, is faulty: if a text means what it says [to every critic], then it means nothing in particular” (13). Behind the accusation of intentional fallacy lies the idea of public consensus, which Hirsch characterizes as a “myth” (12). Only the presupposition of authorial meaning could distinguish between correct and incorrect readings.

The most frequent refutation of the notion is that “the author’s meaning is inaccessible” (14), and even if it were possible, that would be irrelevant to the interpretation of the text. To this accusation, Hirsch responds that the verbal meanings conveyed by written verbal utterance do not represent all the meanings intended by the author, and that they are intersubjective. Interpretation is concerned with sharable meanings only (18-19).

This also provides an answer to the last important allegation against authorial ignorance: “an author often does not know what he means” (19) It is a well-known fact that there are mechanisms of an author’s intended meanings which he is not aware of, but which the interpreter may make explicit, thus enriching the work. This only points out that the author and the reader may share some meanings, but not all meanings of a text. A text consists of several “complexes of meaning”, not just one, and it would be a fallacy to claim that a particular interpretation is grounded in the nature of the text or that “linguistic signs can somehow speak their own language” (23-25).

On pragmatic reasons, Hirsch favors interpretation as a “recognition of the author’s meaning”, but adds that the choice of norm in interpretation is a “free social and ethical act” (26) On the assumption of reproducibility and determinacy, i.e., self-identity, of meaning, Hirsch rejects the prejudice against anachronistic interpretation and the “dogma” (of Reader Response criticism) that every interpreter understands a text of the past differently”, because it seems to ignore the fact that “[a]ll understanding of cultural entities past or present is “constructed” (42-43). “Possible meanings”, he reminds us, should not be confused with “actual meanings”. Once the idea of a determinate meaning is accepted, we should also accept the notion of a “determinate will”, the author’s (45-46).

The intention of the author cannot be reduced to the project, to clear and lucid intention, “intention is not premeditation” (Hirsch 13). Rather, it should be taken in the sense of phenomenological intentionality, of consciousness of being directed toward something (Husserl 107ff). Having the intention of doing something, does not mean being aware of everything that is involved in the process. In this sense, intention does not pre-exist the text, it is *in actu* in the text, and is the object of interpretation.

Institutionally, the author remains a source of contention between philosophers, aestheticians, and theoreticians of literature. The new technologies of communication (hypertext) are further eroding the notion and making its legitimacy infinitely more

problematic. Paradoxically, the continuous argument over the author has made us more sensitive to it. The author continues to exist as a figure in the dialogical relation between the reader and the text, as a hermeneutical category, a reference for interpretation.

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