

THE DEATH OF THE AUTHOR: AN ANALYTICAL AUTOPSY

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I

It is now over twenty years since Roland Barthes proclaimed the 'death of the author' and the phrase, if not the fact, is well established in the literary critical community. But what exactly does it mean? I suspect that many Anglo-American aestheticians have tended, consciously or otherwise, to shrug off Barthes's formulation as a mere Gallic hyperbole for their own more sober 'intentionalist fallacy' and thus have given the matter no further attention. In fact, as I will show, the significant doctrines underlying the 'death of the author' are far removed from the convivial debate about intentions and have their sights set not just on the humble author but on the concept of literature itself and even the concept of meaning.

My aim is to identify and analyse the main theses in two papers which are the seminal points of reference for the relevant doctrines: Roland Barthes's 'The Death of the Author' and Michel Foucault's 'What is an Author?'.¹ I will be asking what the theses mean and whether they are true. I will not be discussing in any detail the broader context of the papers either in relation to general currents of thought or with regard to other work by the two theorists. My interest is with the arguments not the authors. I believe that the ideas as formulated in these articles—ideas about authorship, texts, writing, reading—are fundamental to the movement labelled post-structuralism yet are imprecisely expressed and often misunderstood. Submitting them to an analytical study I hope will be instructive not only to those sceptical of Post-Structuralism but also for those supporters who might be unclear about the precise implications.

I will focus on four main theses which strike me as prominent in the papers. These I will dub The Historicist Thesis, The Death Thesis, The Author Function Thesis, and The *Ecriture* Thesis. All are closely interwoven and each has sub-components which will need to be spelt out. It is not my contention that Barthes and Foucault agree at every point—they clearly don't—but in combination they do present a case about authors and texts which has had a powerful influence on the development of a whole school of modern thought.

II

THE HISTORICIST THESIS

I will use Barthes's own words as a general characterization of the thesis:

The author is a modern figure, a product of our society. (p. 142)

Foucault speaks of the 'coming into being of the notion of "author"' at a specific 'moment . . . in the history of ideas' (p. 101). Both locate the birth of the author in post-mediaeval times, a manifestation of the rise of the individual from the Reformation through to the philosophical Enlightenment. I am less concerned with the historical details than with the status (and meaning) of the Historicist Thesis. The idea that written works only acquired authors at a specific time in history clearly needs some explanation. I suggest there are at least three possible explanations, not mutually exclusive, and they will have a bearing on how to interpret the other theses in the overall argument. I should add that I am going to eliminate as uninteresting a merely lexicographical interpretation of the Historicist Thesis, i.e., an interpretation that sees the thesis as about the *word* 'author'. I take it that there could be authors prior to there being a word 'author' just as there can be writers before the word 'writer' and thoughts before the word 'thoughts'. No doubt for some even this is controversial but I do not believe that Barthes and Foucault had lexicography in mind in their defence of the Historicist Thesis.

The first (plausible) interpretation, then, is this:

A certain conception of a writer (writer-as-author) is modern. For Foucault this conception is highly specific; in effect it is a legal and social conception of authorship. The author is seen as an owner of property, a producer of marketable goods, as having rights over those goods, and also responsibilities: 'Texts, books, and discourses really began to have authors . . . to the extent that authors became subject to punishment' (p. 108). In a similar vein Barthes identifies the author with 'capitalist ideology' (p. 143). I will call this interpretation of the Historicist Thesis the 'social conception', the point being that at a determinate stage in history, according to the thesis, writers (of certain kinds of texts) came to acquire a new social status, along with a corresponding legal and cultural recognition.

Again, I will not debate the truth of this historical claim—I suspect the actual details would not stand up to close scrutiny—but only comment on its theoretical implications. For example, it entails a distinction between an unrestricted notion of writer-*per-se* (any person who writes) and a more restricted notion of writer-as-author, the latter conceived in social or ideological terms. That distinction is useful in showing that the mere act of writing (writing on the sand, jottings on an envelope) does not make an author. An

author so designated is a more weighty figure with legal rights and social standing, a producer of texts deemed to have value. Significantly, the thesis on this interpretation is about social conventions and a class of persons engaged in particular acts: it is not about a persona, a fictional character, or a construct of the text. Being about the personal status of authors it can offer no direct support, as we will see, for either the Author Function Thesis or the *Écriture* Thesis, both of which conceive the author in impersonal terms.

The second interpretation of the Historicist Thesis I will call the 'criticism conception':

A certain conception of criticism (author-based criticism) is modern

Here the idea is that at a certain stage of history the focus of criticism turned to the personality of the author. Thus Barthes:

The image of literature to be found in ordinary culture is tyrannically centred on the author, his person, his life, his tastes, his passions, while criticism still consists for the most part in saying that Baudelaire's work is the failure of Baudelaire the man, Van Gogh's his madness, Tchaikovsky's his vice. (p. 143)

This state of affairs arose, according to Barthes, only after the bourgeois revolution which gave prominence to the individual. We can leave it to historians to debate the historical development of author-based criticism. No doubt it is a matter of degree how much critical significance is given at different periods of history to an author's biographical background or personality. Although the author as person (writer, cause, origin, etc.) is again evoked in this interpretation, it is nevertheless distinct from the 'social conception'. No direct implications about criticism follow from the fact that the author comes to be viewed as having rights over a text. Purely formalist criticism is compatible with a state of affairs where an author is accorded a secure legal and social identity.

The third interpretation is the most controversial but also the most interesting:

A certain conception of a text (the authored-text) is modern

This I will call the 'text conception' of the Historicist Thesis. The idea is this, that at a certain point in history (written) texts acquire significance in virtue of being 'authored'. 'There was a time,' Foucault writes, 'when the texts which we today call "literary" (narratives, stories, epics, tragedies, comedies) were accepted, put into circulation, and valorized without any question about the identity of their author' (p. 109). He contrasts this with the case of scientific discourses which, in the Middle Ages, owed their authority to a named provenance (Hippocrates, Pliny, or whoever). A radical change occurred, so Foucault claims, in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries when literary texts

came to be viewed as essentially 'authored', while scientific writing could carry authority even in anonymity.

These are of course sweeping generalizations which again invite substantial qualification from the scrupulous historian of ideas. For our purposes further clarification is in order. The text conception is itself open to different interpretations. At its simplest it is just the claim that at a specific point in history (perhaps a different point for different discourses) it became important that texts be attributed. A stronger claim is that this attribution actually changed the way texts were understood. That is, they could not be properly understood except as *by so-and-so*. The author attribution carried the meaning, perhaps as personal revelation, expression of belief, seal of authority, or whatever. Foucault probably has in mind at least this latter claim. But from the evidence of his Author Function Thesis, which we will look at later, he seems to want something stronger still for the text conception. The suggestion is that the personal aspects of author attribution disappear altogether. It is not actual causal origins which mark the difference between an authored and an unauthored text but rather certain (emergent) properties of the text itself. The authored-text is viewed as the manifestation of a creative act but what is important is that this yields or makes accessible a distinctive kind of unity, integrity, meaning, interest, and value. And it is these qualities themselves, rather than their relation to some particular authorial performance, which are given prominence under this strengthened version of the Historicist Thesis.

There is a slide then in the text conception from the mere association of text and author to the much fuller conception of a text as a classifiable work of a certain kind fulfilling a purpose, expressing a meaning and yielding a value. I suggest that the plausibility of the Historicist Thesis weakens as it progresses along this scale. In other words the conception of certain pieces of writing as having meaning, unity and value seems much less datable historically (was there ever a time when there was no such conception?) than the mere inclination to highlight author attribution.

III

THE DEATH THESIS

Against this background we can now turn to the second substantive thesis, which I have called the Death Thesis. At its simplest, this merely claims:

The author is dead

The meaning of the claim, and assessment of its truth, can only be determined relative to the Historicist Thesis, under its different interpretations. The underlying thought is this: that if a certain conception (of an author, a text, etc.) has a definite historical beginning, i.e., arises under determinate historical

conditions, then it can in principle come to an end, when the historical conditions change.

One complication is that the Death Thesis can be read either as a statement of fact or as wishful thinking, i.e., either as a description of the current state of affairs (we simply no longer *have* authors conceived in a certain way) or as a prescription for the future (we no longer *need* authors so conceived, we can now get by without them).² Both Barthes and Foucault seem to waver on the question of description and prescription. Barthes, for example, admits that 'the sway of the Author remains powerful' (p. 143) yet in speaking of the 'modern scriptor', in contrast to the Author (pp. 145, 146), he suggests that (modern) writing is no longer conceived as the product of an author. Similarly, Foucault tells us 'we must locate the space left empty by the author's disappearance' (p. 105), the latter thus taken for granted, yet makes a prediction at the end of his paper that the author function, which is his own conception of the author, 'will disappear', i.e., sometime in the future, 'as our society changes' (p. 119).

To see what the Death Thesis amounts to, let us run briefly through the different permutations.

(A) [In relation to the social conception of the Historicist Thesis] the writer-as-author is dead, or should be

Does the conception of writer-as-author, with a certain social and legal status, still obtain? Surely it does. Authors are still, in Foucault's words, 'subject to punishment' (they can even be sentenced to death); there are copyright laws and blasphemy laws; authors can be sued for libel or plagiarism; they attract interest from biographers and gossips. Authors under this conception are certainly not dead. But should they be killed off? Should we try and rid ourselves of this conception? The question is political and moral, not philosophical. Should we promote a society where all writing is anonymous, where writers have no legal status and no obligations? Maybe. But the point is quite independent of any theoretical argument about *écriture* or the author function, for it is a point about the treatment of actual people in a political and legal system.

(B) [In relation to the criticism conception of the Historicist Thesis] author-based criticism is dead, or should be

Here we come closest to the Intentionalist Fallacy in that anti-intentionalists can be seen as advancing some such version of the Death Thesis. But note, first, that anti-intentionalists are not committed to a version based on the social conception of authorship, nor indeed to the text conception. Also, second, they are committed only to the normative element (author-based criticism should be dead) not to the descriptive element (*it is in fact dead*).

Although there is certainly an overlap here between the anti-intentionalists

and Barthes and Foucault it seems to be the only point of contact. If the Death Thesis simply records and endorses the decline of crude author-based criticism then it is of only modest theoretical interest. Of course the debate continues about the proper role of authorial intention in literary criticism but there does seem to be a general consensus that concentration on purely biographical factors—or the so-called personality of an author—is not integral to a serious critical discipline. In fact, as we shall see, it is quite clear that Barthes and Foucault had something more substantial in their sights when they advanced the Death Thesis. Nevertheless, much of the credibility of the thesis undoubtedly trades off the more secure intuitions within the literary critical community that pure author-based criticism is a legitimate target. It is thus important to identify the real Death Thesis as intended by Barthes and Foucault so that we don't find ourselves forced to assent through a mistaken interpretation.

(C) [In relation to the text conception of the Historicist Thesis] the authored-text is dead, or should be

Does the conception of the authored-text still obtain, that is, the text conceived as having a determinate meaning, as the manifestation of a creative act? Certainly the qualities of unity, expressiveness and creative imagination are still sought and valued in literary works, indeed they are bound up with the very conception of literature. If possession of these is sufficient for something's being an authored-text, then authored-texts are not dead. Remember, though, that an authored-text, on the strong interpretation, is defined independently of its relation to an actual author (or author-as-person). The meaning and unity of an authored-text are explicable not in terms of some real act of creation, some determinate psychological origin, but only as a projection of these in the text itself. This is the import of the Author Function Thesis.

Foucault would accept that literary criticism still retains its conception of the authored-text: in fact he perceives this conception as the foundation of literary criticism. The Death Thesis, then, in this version, must be seen as a prescription not a description. Foucault's project is to get rid of the authored-text itself (along with its concomitant notions of meaning, interpretation, unity, expression, and value). The Author Function, which is the defining feature of an authored-text, is, according to Foucault, 'an ideological product' (p. 119), a repressive and restricting 'principle of thrift in the proliferation of meaning' (p. 118). In effect Foucault's death prescription is aimed at the very concept of a literary work which sustains the practice of literary criticism (it is also aimed, more broadly, at any class of work subject to similar interpretative and evaluative constraints). The prescription has little to do with the role or status of authors as persons.

Seen in this light, it is no defence against Foucault's attack to point out that the literary institution has long ceased to give prominence to an author's

personality. That would be to give undue weight to the weaker versions of the Death Thesis. There is no room for the complacent thought that Foucault is just another anti-intentionalist. On the other hand, Foucault cannot find support for his attack on the authored-text merely through an appeal to the inadequacy of crude author-based criticism. He has in effect pushed the debate beyond the author altogether.

IV

THE AUTHOR FUNCTION THESIS

The Author Function Thesis is intended to provide further support for the strong version (i.e., version (C)) of the Death Thesis. Although the notion is never explicitly defined by Foucault, the central idea is that the author function is a property of a discourse (or text) and amounts to something more than its just being written or produced by a person (of whatever status): 'there are a certain number of discourses that are endowed with the "author function", while others are deprived of it' (p. 107).

We can identify a number of separate components of the thesis which help to clarify the notion of 'author function'. First there is the distinctness claim:

- (1) The author function is distinct from the author-as-person (or writer)

Foucault makes it clear that the author function 'does not refer purely and simply to a real individual' (p. 113). He complicates the exposition by often using the term interchangeably with 'the author'; however, the term 'author' itself is not intended as a direct designation of an individual. He says that 'it would be . . . wrong to equate the author with the real writer' (p. 112) and he speaks of the author as 'a certain functional principle' (p. 119).

What are the grounds for postulating an impersonal conception of an author as distinct from a personal conception? Foucault does not simply have in mind the literary critical notion of an 'implied author', i.e., a set of attitudes informing a work which might or might not be shared with the real author. For one thing Foucault's author function is not a construct specific to individual works but may bind together a whole *oeuvre*; and whereas an implied author is, as it were, just one fictional character among others in a work, the author function is more broadly conceived as determining the very nature of the work itself.³

One of the arguments that Foucault offers for the distinctness claim (1), indeed it is also his justification for describing the author as an 'ideological product' (p. 119), rests on a supposed discrepancy between the way we normally conceive the author as a person (i.e., as a genius, a creator, one who proliferates meaning) and the way we conceive texts which have authors (i.e., as constrained in their meaning and confined in the uses to which they can be put). But this argument is unsatisfactory simply because there is no such discrepancy. To the extent that we conceive of an author as offering 'an

inexhaustible world of significations' (p. 118), as a proliferator of meaning, then we expect precisely the same of the work he creates.

It is more promising to read Foucault as proposing a semi-technical sense of the term 'author', one which conforms to the following principle:

- (2) 'Having an author' is not a relational predicate (characterizing a relation between a work and a person) but a monadic predicate (characterizing a certain kind of work).

This principle signals the move from 'X has an author' to 'X is authored' or more explicitly from 'X has Y as an author' (the relational predicate) to 'X is Y-authored' (the monadic predicate). The author function becomes a property of a text or discourse not a relation between a text and a person. We need to ask what the monadic predicate 'being authored' or being 'Y-authored' actually means in this special sense.

First, though, it might be helpful to offer a further elaboration of (2) in terms of paraphrase or reduction:

- (3) All relevant claims about the relation between an author-as-person and a text are reducible to claims about an authored-text.

In this way the author disappears through a process comparable to ontological reduction by paraphrase. In place of, for example, 'The work is a product of the author's creative act' we can substitute 'The work is an authored-text' and still retain the significant cognitive content of the former. Such a semantic manoeuvre is not intended, of course, to show that authors (as persons) are redundant. At best its aim is to show that *relative to critical discourse* references to an author can be eliminated without loss of significant content. I take it that some such thesis underlies Foucault's statement that the

aspects of an individual which we designate as making him an author are only a projection, in more or less psychologizing terms, of the operations that we force texts to undergo, the connections that we make, the traits that we establish as pertinent, the continuities that we recognize, or the exclusions that we practice. (p 110)

Foucault is thinking of such aspects as an author's 'design' and 'creative power', as well as the meaning, unity and expression with which the author informs the text. He believes, as we have seen, that these features can be attributed directly to an authored-text without reference back to the author-as-person. This is the heart of the Author Function Thesis.

What support can be offered for propositions (2) and (3)? After all, they are not obviously true and they depart from the more familiar meaning of 'author'. The main logical support that Foucault offers is an argument about authors' names. An author's name, he suggests, does not operate purely referentially; rather than picking out some individual person, it has, he says, a

'classificatory function', it 'serves to characterize a certain mode of being of discourse' (p. 107). I think he has something like the following in mind:

(4) (Some) author attributions (using an author's name) are non-extensional.

If we say that a play is by Shakespeare we mean, or connote, more than just that the play was written by a particular man (Shakespeare); for one thing we assign a certain honorific quality to it (it is likely to be a play worthy of our attention); also we relate the play to a wider body of work, to *Hamlet*, *King Lear*, *Twelfth Night*, and so on. Being 'by Shakespeare' signals not just an external relation but an internal characterization. We move from 'X is a play by Shakespeare' to 'X is a Shakespeare play' or even 'X is Shakespearean'. The latter formulations are non-extensional, or at least have non-extensional readings, in the sense that substitution of co-referential names is not always permissible (does not preserve truth); if Shakespeare turns out to be Bacon it doesn't follow that the plays become Baconian, where that has its own distinctive connotations.

Let us suppose that stated like this the argument has some merit. Does it in fact support the Author Function Thesis? Certainly it provides an illustration of the move from a relational predicate to a monadic predicate: in this case from 'by Shakespeare' to 'Shakespearean'. Is this an instance of the move from 'X has Y as an author' to 'X is Y-authored'? Maybe. But what it shows is that we are not obliged to make the move. 'X has Shakespeare as an author' has both a non-extensional, classificatory meaning *and* a fully extensional, relational meaning. In other words the reference to Shakespeare the person still stands. By pointing, quite rightly, to the classificatory function of authors' names Foucault mistakenly supposes that this in itself eliminates the referential function.

What about the move, in (2), from 'X has an author' to 'X is authored'? This move is not directly supported by the argument from authors' names but hangs on a distinctive conception of an 'authored-text'. This takes us back to the Historicist Thesis. Foucault, as we saw, has in mind not just the attribution of an author to a text, nor in the more sophisticated version of (4) a text classified through a non-extensional attribution, but rather a notion of an authored-text conceived more broadly:

(5) An authored-text is one that is subject to interpretation, constrained in its meaning, exhibiting unity and coherence, and located in a system of values

It is precisely this notion he is attacking when he attacks the author function. But now we can begin to see how uncomfortably the pieces fit together for Foucault. For one thing the author as a person—with a personality, a biography, a legal status and social standing—has no role in (5). The reductive theses (2) and (3) see to that, as does the distinctness thesis (1). In effect, Foucault has recognized, in postulating the author function and the notion of an authored-

text, that the qualities in (5) are *institutionally based* qualities, i.e., part of the conception of literature, and not *individualistically based*, i.e., formulated in terms of individual psychological attitudes.⁴ There is no need to see the constraints on interpretation, nor the source of unity and coherence, nor the criteria of value, as directly attributable to an individual (the author-as-person).

If that is the point of the Author Function Thesis then it has some force, albeit reiterating a position well-established in anti-intentionalist critical theory. But Foucault cannot have it both ways: he cannot distance the authored-text from the author-as-person and yet at the same time mount his attack on the authored-text on the grounds that it perpetuates the bourgeois ideology of the individual, that it elevates the author into a position of God-like power and authority, enshrined in law. It is as if Foucault has not fully assimilated the implications of his own Author Function Thesis; he speaks as if his main target is still the author-as-person behind and beyond the work informing it with a secret and inner meaning. Perhaps the source of the problem is the misleading invocation of the author in the terms 'author function' and 'authored-text'. Strictly speaking, authors have nothing to do with it; the authored-text, so-called, at least in its most obvious manifestation, is a literary work, defined institutionally. Literary works have authors, of course; they are the product of a creative act (a real act from a real agent) but the constraints on interpretation, and the determination of coherence and value, are independent of the individual author's will. That is the lesson of the Death Thesis in its more plausible versions and it should be the lesson too of the Author Function Thesis.

V

THE 'ÉCRITURE' THESIS

Barthes's version of the author function is what he calls the 'modern scriptor' who is 'born simultaneously with the text' (p. 145). But Barthes bases his move from the relational author to the non-relational scriptor—i.e., his version of the Author Function Thesis—on a thesis about writing (*écriture*). The basic claim of what I have called the *Écriture* Thesis is this (in Barthes's words):

Writing is the destruction of every voice, of every point of origin. (p. 142)

The implication is that the very nature of writing makes the author—i.e., the author-as-person—redundant. What arguments does Barthes offer to support this thesis?

The first is an argument from narrative:

As soon as a fact is *narrated* no longer with a view to acting directly on reality but intransitively, that is to say, finally outside of any function other than that of the very practice of the symbol itself. . . the voice loses its origin. (p. 142)

The trouble is, it is difficult to conceive of any act of narration which in fact satisfies the condition of having no other function than the 'practice of the symbol itself'. Nearly all narration has some further aim, indeed the aim in some form or other to 'act . . . directly on reality': be it to inform, entertain, persuade, instruct, or whatever. Narration is by definition an *act* and no acts are truly gratuitous. Strictly speaking the narrative argument collapses here.

Still, one might suppose, charitably, that certain kinds of *fictional* narrative come close to Barthes's specification: narratives where playfulness is paramount. It is a convention of some kinds of fiction that they draw attention to their own fictional status, that they point inward rather than outward, that they teasingly conceal their origin, and so forth. But even if we grant that in these special cases attention focuses only on the 'symbol itself', there is nothing here to support a general thesis about writing (or authors). For one thing, there are different kinds of conventions governing written (like spoken) narratives, often far removed from the tricks of fiction, and in many such cases narrative purpose (and thus the 'voice of origin') is manifest. Also of course not all writing is in narrative form.

A second argument for the *Écriture* Thesis rests on the characterization of writing as performative:

writing can no longer designate an operation of recording, notation, representation, 'depiction' . . . ; rather, it designates . . . a performative . . . in which the enunciation has no other content than the act by which it is uttered. (pp. 145-6)

But the claim that writing has the status of a performative utterance, instead of supporting the *Écriture* Thesis, in fact directly contradicts it. A performative utterance only counts as an act—a promise, a marriage, a declaration of war—under precisely specified contextual conditions; and one of those conditions, essential in each case, is the speaker's having appropriate intentions. Far from being the destruction of a 'voice of origin' the successful performative relies crucially on the disposition and authority of the speaker. The analogy, then, to say the least, is unfortunate.

Clearly what impressed Barthes about the performative utterance is another feature: that of self-validation. If I say 'I promise' I am not reporting some external fact but, under the right conditions, bringing a fact into existence. However, even if we set aside the requirement of the speaker's authority, and focus only on the feature of self-validation, the analogy with performatives is still inadequate. Once again Barthes is led to an unwarranted generalization about the nature of writing by taking as a paradigm a certain kind of fictive utterance, which creates its own facts or world, and ignoring more commonplace illocutionary purposes.

The third argument is about meaning. The thought is this, that writing *per se*, in contrast to the constrained authored-text, does not yield any determinate meaning:

a text is not a line of words releasing a single 'theological' meaning (the 'message' of the Author-God) but a multi-dimensional space in which a variety of writings, none of them original, blend and clash. (p. 146)

We find the same idea in Foucault, even though he voices some scepticism later on about *écriture*: 'today's writing has freed itself from the dimension of expression', 'it is an interplay of signs', it 'unfolds like a game' (p. 102). How does this support the thesis that writing has destroyed the voice of origin? The argument seems to go something like this: determinate meaning is always the product of authorial imposition, where there is no determinate meaning there is no author, writing *per se* (*écriture*) has no determinate meaning (it is a mere play of signs), so writing *per se* shows the author to be redundant. The reasoning is bizarre. Its formal validity is suspect and it also begs the question that there is such a thing as writing *per se*. *Écriture* is in effect stipulated to be author-less, to be lacking in determinate meaning, to be free of interpretative constraints. But this very conception of *écriture* needs to be challenged.

The key is the idea of a 'text'. A 'text', as Barthes conceives it, is a specific manifestation of *écriture*. It is to be contrasted with a 'work'; a work belongs in a genre, its meaning is constrained, it has an author, it is subject to classification. A text, Barthes tells us, is 'always *paradoxical*'; it 'practises the infinite deferment of the signified';⁵ 'it answers not to an interpretation, even a liberal one, but to an explosion, a dissemination' (p. 159); 'it cannot be contained in a hierarchy, even in a simple division of genres' (p. 157); and 'no vital "respect" is due to the Text: it can be *broken*' (p. 161). This idea of a text as an explosion of unconstrained meaning, without origin and without purpose, is a theoretician's fiction. Perhaps we could, by abstraction, come to look at writing in this way but it would be quite idle to do so. It would be like trying to hear a Mozart symphony as a mere string of unstructured sounds. More importantly, though, it is no part of the concept of writing (or language) that it should be so viewed. Writing, like speech, or any language 'performed', is inevitably, and properly, conceived as purposive. To use language as meaningful discourse is to perform speech acts; to understand discourse is, minimally, to grasp what speech acts are performed. Barthes's view of *écriture* and of texts tries to abstract language from the very function that gives it life.

An underlying assumption in both Barthes and Foucault is that there is intrinsic merit in what Foucault calls the 'proliferation of meaning'. Perhaps the fundamental objection to their combined programme is that this assumption is unsupported and untenable. By prescribing the death of the author and by promoting the text over the work, both writers see themselves as liberating meaning from unnatural and undesirable restrictions. They both assume that more is better. Part of the problem is that they are trapped by a gratuitous, and inappropriate, political vocabulary: 'repression', 'authority', 'control'. But deeper still they reveal a predilection for a peculiarly sterile form of literary

criticism, exemplified perhaps by certain passages in Empson's *Seven Types of Ambiguity* and pressed almost *ad absurdum* in Barthes's own *S/Z*, where the literary work is seen as a limitless and unrestricted source of connotation and allusion. What is objectionable is that they have set up this conception as a paradigm not only of criticism but, worse, of reading itself.

The critical community at large soon tired of the simplistic proliferation of meaning and outside the literary institution it never even got a foothold. It is a non-starter—pointless if not impossible—to conceive of scientific or historical or philosophical discourse as *écriture*. It is always more interesting, more demanding, more rewarding for understanding, to consolidate meaning, to seek structure and coherence, to locate a work in a tradition or practice. This has nothing whatsoever to do with reinstating some bullying authoritarian author. But then that figure was always just a fiction anyway.⁶

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REFERENCES

- ¹ I will be using the following texts: Roland Barthes, 'The Death of the Author', in *Image-Music-Text*, Essays Selected and Translated by Stephen Heath (Fontana/Collins, 1977), Michel Foucault, 'What is an Author?' in *The Foucault Reader*, edited by Paul Rabinow (Peregrine Books, 1986). All citations and page references are from these editions.
- ² A similar ambiguity lies in the origin of the Death Thesis, namely Nietzsche's proclamation that 'God is dead' Was Nietzsche describing a new human consciousness already in evidence or was he heralding a radical break with the past?
- ³ I am guided here, indeed throughout this essay, by the useful discussion in Alexander Nehamas, 'Writer, Text, Work, Author', in Anthony J. Cascardi, ed., *Literature and the Question of Philosophy* (Johns Hopkins U P, 1987).
- ⁴ For a clear account of institutional qualities in the literary context, see Stein Haugom Olsen, 'Literary Aesthetics and Literary Practice', in *The End of Literary Theory* (Cambridge U.P., 1987)
- ⁵ Roland Barthes, 'From Work to Text', in *Image-Music-Text*, op. cit., p 158
- ⁶ An earlier version of this paper was presented at a conference of the Nordic Aesthetics Society in Helsinki in May 1989.