

The Death of the Author: A Difficult Demise - Rethinking Roland Barthes' "The Death of the Author"

Jiajie Du

Zhejiang Normal University, ZJNU, Jinhua 321000, China

Abstract: Roland Barthes' proposition of "the death of the author" represents a pivotal revolution in 20th-century literary criticism, overturning the traditional author-centered conception of literature and advocating the "killing" of the author to liberate both the reader and the text. This thesis re-examines this theory by tracing the structuralist features of *The Death of the Author*. It demonstrates that Barthes, drawing on structural linguistics, distinguishes between "author" and "scriptor," as well as between "work" and "text," emphasizing the primacy of language and the multidimensional space of the text. The article further analyzes how the theory dismantles authorial authority from multiple angles, and then explores the resultant liberation of the reader and the carnival of the text. However, alongside its theoretical contributions, the thesis also identifies certain problems: it neglects the author's individual style and underestimates the author's value to the text. Moreover, in reading practice, the reader remains influenced by the author, and in turn transforms into a new author. The thesis argues that what Barthes terms "the death of the author" is in fact the death of authorial authority, not the disappearance of the author as a creative individual. The author may "return" in a new guise, bringing his or her lived experience back into literary activity.

Keywords: Roland Barthes, Death of the Author, Birth of the Reader, Structuralism, Text Theory.

1. Introduction

Roland Barthes concludes his essay *The Death of the Author* with the famous assertion: "We know that to give writing its future, we must overthrow the myth: the birth of the reader must be at the cost of the death of the Author."^[1] The publication of this essay caused a great stir in Western literary circles at the time, radically challenging traditional literary notions. It can be regarded as a revolution in 20th-century criticism. In this essay, Barthes criticizes the conventional conception of the author. Traditionally, the work is seen as created by the author's hand, with the author regarded as the source of literary creation and placed at the center. Consequently, literary critics have focused all their attention on studying the author himself.

Before Barthes, modern Western literary criticism had already undergone a shift, with the author's subjective status being questioned by Russian Formalism, the New Criticism, and structuralism. Yet Barthes' "death of the author" delivered the decisive blow to the practice of "murdering" the author, declaring his death directly and thoroughly. In Barthes' view, only by burying the author can readers redirect their attention to the literary work itself. However, his view inevitably invites skepticism. First, does the claim at the end of his essay announce or overturn the idea that "the birth of the reader must be at the cost of the death of the Author"? Second, since the author is one of the four essential elements of literary activity, its importance is self-evident-so can such a crucial figure truly be "dead"? Can the meaning of a text be interpreted without the author? And under such a view, can the author "return"? To address these questions, we must examine the text of *The Death of the Author*, its features, and related studies.

2. Structuralist Features of The Death of the Author

To analyze the structuralist features of *The Death of the*

Author, we must briefly describe and examine its text:

First, Barthes begins by analyzing a passage from Balzac's novel *Sarrasine* concerning the protagonist, raising the question "Who is speaking?" and simultaneously articulating his conception of "writing": "Writing is the destruction of every voice, of every point of origin. Writing is that neutral, composite, oblique space where our subject slips away; writing is the negative where all identity is lost, starting with the very identity of the writing body."^[2] Barthes deliberately uses the term "writing" to distinguish structuralist theory from phenomenology, biographical criticism, and other approaches. However, his notion of "writing" in effect corresponds to what we generally call "literary view." This conception establishes the theoretical tone and structuralist orientation of the entire essay, constituting its first major theoretical contribution.

Second, after a historical survey and analysis of the "author" problem, Barthes concludes that the "author" has always occupied a "dominant" position in literary creation and criticism. To change this state, he proposes: "the death of the author, the birth of writing."^[3] Barthes maintains that only the author's death can usher in the structuralist "writing"-this is the second theoretical significance of the essay.

Third, Barthes observes that the power of the "author" is considerable; certain French "New Criticism" schools, such as phenomenology, actually reinforced rather than weakened the author's role in literary creation. Nevertheless, many French writers like Mallarmé had already rebelled against the author's dominant position, asserting that "it is language that speaks, not the author." But these writers' individual practices are insufficient to terminate the status of the "author." Barthes explicitly states that "only Saussurean structural linguistics can provide a truly valuable theoretical arsenal and methodological tool for the complete death of the 'author.'"^[4] This is the third significance.

Fourth, on the basis of structural linguistics, Barthes proposes two pairs of corresponding concepts: "author" vs. "scriptor," and "work" vs. "text." These concepts are crucial.

They accord with the earlier claim that “the death of the author gives rise to writing”: the author’s death brings forth the scriptor, while the “destruction” of the work gives way to the emergence of the text. Moreover, Barthes notes that, unlike the sequential relationship between “author” and “work” in literary activity, the relationship between “scriptor” and “text” in writing activity is one of simultaneity and coexistence.^[5] Using structural linguistics as a tool, Barthes appropriates Saussure’s distinction between “diachrony” and “synchrony” to differentiate these two sets of concepts, offering a structuralist interpretation of the scriptor-text relationship.

Fifth, Barthes elaborates on the essential difference between the “text” of the scriptor and the “work” of the author in terms of meaning. He argues that the text is not composed of words in the sense of a single meaning conferred by the author, but rather a multidimensional space constituted by various writings with no single origin. In a vein similar to his argument in *From Work to Text* (1971), he contends that the work is a tangible object, while the text resides in language; writing is no longer the effusion of the author’s passion, but the scriptor’s endless drawing from the dictionary, and the book is merely a weave of linguistic signs.^[6]

Sixth, Barthes correlates the “critic” with the “author” of the “work,” arguing that the critic takes it as his mission to find the “author” beneath the work, and thus the so-called “dominant” position of the author over the work is in fact the critic’s own dominant position over the work. That is to say, with the death of the dominant “author,” the dominant “critic” must also perish—this is the sixth theoretical implication.^[7]

The seventh part serves as a summary of the whole essay. First, Barthes reiterates that it is no longer a “person” or “subject” that speaks, but “language” itself—i.e., the subject withdraws and language appears. Second, writing equals reading: the final “text” produced by writing is for the “reader,” and its ultimate convergence point is the reader—but this reader is a figure without history, biography, or psychology, meaning that the reader is actually the multidimensional space formed by all the citations that constitute writing. Third, “classical criticism” has only focused on the author and never on the reader, yet it condemns the author in the name of the reader—which is undoubtedly naive. Therefore, Barthes’ argument may ultimately be aimed at giving a future to new writing, overthrowing the myth that “the birth of the reader must be at the cost of the death of the Author.”

3. The Theory’s Dissolution of the Author’s Subjective Position

Whether the claim “the death of the author” announces or overturns the cost of the reader’s birth remains difficult to determine, yet the theory undeniably dissolves authorial authority. How, then, does it achieve this dissolution?

First, from the perspective of the narrative subject, the author is not the sole subject of the literary work. Barthes uses Balzac’s *Sarrasine* to ask “who is speaking” in a given sentence. He suggests that the speaker could be the novel’s protagonist, Balzac himself with his different views, or a generally applicable wisdom—in any case, more than one speaker exists. Moreover, from our ordinary reading experience, the “I,” “you,” and “he” in narrative works are generally not the author himself, but mere narrative signs. In Barthes’ view, the subject of narrative is not solely the author; even when using first-, second-, or third-person pronouns,

they merely indicate “I,” “you,” or “he” without further significance.^[8] In this regard, the author’s subjectivity has been considerably weakened.

Second, historically, the concept of the author was not always present; it emerged with the evolution of society and literature. Roland Barthes notes: “The author is a modern figure, a product of our society; its emergence has a historical process: it is produced from medieval society, with English empiricism, French rationalism, and the personal faith of the Protestant Reformation.”^[9] In eras like the Middle Ages, when belief in the author prevailed, the author occupied a dominant position, and people studied the author’s status, life, preferences, and so on. Today, the author is reduced to a “modern scriptor,” who is born simultaneously with the text; the scriptor always writes with previous gestures in mind, imitating endlessly, and this infinite imitation and ceaseless writing aims merely to complete the writing task, without any emotional involvement.^[10] Thus, the author’s identity is supplanted by the “scriptor,” becoming increasingly marginalized, and the author’s status is gradually dissolved.

Third, from the perspective of literary language, the author’s position is also eroded. As mentioned, the fourth part of *The Death of the Author* addresses this. Barthes applies linguistic theory to literary issues under the influence of Saussure and structuralist thought. He states: “Writing can no longer be designated as an ‘operation’ of recording, indicating, expressing, or describing, as the classicists said, but rather, as linguists say of Oxford philosophy, ‘a rare performative form of language.’”^[11] Grammar, representing historical tradition and rules, is the key to literature as a science of human language. Under the structuralist view, the author is subordinate to the language system; language, not the author, is the creator of the work.

Furthermore, from the author-text relationship, the author is not the master of the text. The text is itself a multidimensional space; forcibly imposing the author upon it only narrows that space, restricts the development of textual meaning, and stifles the reader’s imagination. Hence, Barthes believes that to break this fixation, the author must be “murdered”: “to give writing its future, we must overthrow the myth: the birth of the reader must be at the cost of the death of the Author.”^[12] Thus, his concluding statement may well be an announcement of that cost—though perhaps no definitive answer exists.

4. The Birth of the Reader and the Carnival of the Text

“A text is made of multiple writings, drawn from many cultures and entering into mutual relations of dialogue, parody, and contestation; but this multiplicity is focused on one point, and that point is the reader, not, as has hitherto been said, the author.”^[13] What does Barthes’ “murder” of the author bring to the reader? On the one hand, it liberates the reader completely. Traditionally, readers must infer the author’s intention and grasp the main idea the author wished to express. But with the author dead, readers need not consider the author’s existence, the work’s original meaning, or its logical structure; they can freely express their own interpretations based on their understanding of the text. Thus, readers occupy a more open space for free textual interpretation. On the other hand, reading is redefined: it is not merely an aesthetic judgment but a creative and playful activity. In **S/Z**, Barthes distinguishes between “writerly” (scriptible) and “readerly”

(lisible) texts. The writerly text has no fixed structure; here the reader becomes a producer of the text, able to reread and rewrite indefinitely. The readerly text, by contrast, is readable but not rewritable; the reader, as consumer, can only accept or reject it.^[14] Unsurprisingly, Barthes favors the writerly text, which incorporates the reader's own creativity, reflects the reader's agency, and realizes self-value.

In addition, Barthes distinguishes between work and text: "the work is a fragment of substance, occupying a portion of the space of books; the text, on the other hand, is a methodological field."^[15] This reflects his new literary vision: the work is a tangible object, while the text is not entirely static; it is a process of enunciation, existing in the movement of discourse and constantly changing. Within the multidimensional space of the text, meaning is plural, and this plurality dissolves any single meaning, thereby infinitely expanding the text's potential-meaning enters a realm of endless generation. Textual meaning can be assembled from fragments of infinite signifiers, steering the text in directions wholly different from tradition. In other words, the text moves toward "carnival"-a form of pleasure obtained through the destruction and subversion of tradition. This textual carnival is unrestricted by any condition: the author, traditional values, power discourse, and social culture no longer occupy the center; what the order of signifiers and the text establish is a utopia of language.

5. Problems in Barthes' Theory

First, Barthes overlooks the differentiated features that authors present in their writing. Although he places the author within the linguistic system, he fails to recognize that different authors may exhibit individual styles when using the same language system. This omission is significant. In reading literature, we invariably encounter distinctive styles among different writers. Barthes did not entirely ignore this, but he chose to deflect it through discourse. In *What Is Writing?*, he says: "Style is a private, closed procedure, unrelated to society yet recognized by society; it is in no way a product of choice or of reflection on the subject. It is the personal part of ritual, rising from the writer's mysterious interior but soaring above his responsibilities. It is the decorative voice of an unknown, secret body... Because of its biological origin, style lies outside art, that is, outside the contract that binds the writer to society. Hence, we may imagine that some writers prefer the security of art to the solitude of style."^[16] Barthes thus "evades" the study of individual style by treating it as a mysterious biological phenomenon.

Second, Barthes neglects other significant contributions of the author. Even if the author holds no authoritative status over textual meaning, he or she can still provide meaning for the multiple interpretations of the text. As a unique constructive perspective, the author's offered meaning should constitute a distinctive textual meaning and should not be ignored. Yet Barthes lightly dismisses it.

Third, even though the author is "murdered," his or her influence on the reader cannot be entirely eliminated. In reading, readers are accustomed to inferring and understanding the author's intentions. Barthes himself once admitted that critics, as special "readers," have the task of understanding the author's intention, and whether the reader's interpretation matches the author's original intent is not crucial-what matters is the image of the author that the reader constructs in the process. Thus, the author's image never

completely departs from the reader's experience; the overlapping parts of readers' understanding of a text may well constitute the unified figure of that work, also known as the infinite meaning of the reading text. Barthes, having recognized this, did not pursue it further-a regrettable omission.

From these problems, it is clear that the author cannot be fully "murdered." Moreover, since readers, in their reading, practice the reproduction of the text, and reading in a sense becomes another form of writing, the reader then transforms into an author, exercising authorial rights in a new sense. If "the death of the author" were truly realized, the reader turned author would also enter a new mode of death. If this cycle were complete, how would readers find meaning in reading? Therefore, the author should "return" to the text.

6. Is the Author Really "Dead" and Can He "Return"?

In questioning whether the author truly disappears, Barthes never actually "kills" the author completely. His "death of the author" is far from literal. Barthes targets not the individual author but the death of authority and absoluteness. His intention may have been to use the structuralist linguistic construct of the author to dismantle the author's supreme discursive power, but the author is not actually a mere appendage of linguistic signs, buried within words.

Barthes himself acknowledged the author's existence: "And yet, in the text, at a certain point, I desire the author: I need his image (which is neither his representation nor his projection), just as he needs mine."^[17] The "death" in "the death of the author" refers to the death of the author in the traditional sense, but the real author remains hidden within the text and may return at any time. Furthermore, in his 1960 essay *Writers and Authors*, Barthes distinguishes between "writer" (écrivain) and "author" (auteur): the author uses language for a purpose, while the writer focuses on language itself, and he personally prefers the writer. In practice, however, the writer and the author cannot be fully separated; they are in a relationship of inclusion. The author is a broader category, the writer a narrower one; but as long as the writer Barthes admires persists, the larger concept of "author" will never disappear, and the emotions expressed in their works are their own bodily experiences as subjects.

In *Sade, Fourier, Loyola*, Barthes also mentions "the friendly return of the author" as part of the pleasure of the text, indicating his support for the author's return. Yet this return is a new kind of return: the author reappears in a thoroughly transformed guise, bringing his or her own lived feelings and perceptual experiences back into the generation and critique of literary activity, no longer occupying the center of that activity.

"The death of the author" and "the return of the author" are not contradictory; the "author" in each concept refers to almost entirely different entities. The former represents resistance to the old authorial authority, while the latter responds to the summons of lived experience. In essence, both ultimately aspire to a free and liberated human being.

Barthes' *The Death of the Author* emphasizes the polysemy of the text while negating the author's authority, enabling readers to read freely-but the author never completely vanishes. Will the author truly "die"? The answer is clearly no.

7. Conclusion

The significance of Roland Barthes' *The Death of the Author* lies not in actually eliminating the author, but in breaking the author's absolute monopoly over textual meaning, allowing the reader and language to regain their rightful places. Barthes uses the tool of structuralism to deconstruct the closed chain of "author-work-criticism," opening up multiple possibilities for textual meaning—undeniably a revolutionary vision for literary criticism. Yet, as this thesis has shown, the author does not truly "die": he can neither be completely expelled nor should he be wholly forgotten. The author's style, intention, and lived experience remain indispensable dimensions in the generation of textual meaning, and readers, in their creative reading, inevitably assume the role of "author." Therefore, "the death of the author" is less a pronouncement than a strategic gesture: it warns us against authority and centrality, but it does not refuse the author's "return" in a new guise. This return is no longer dominating but dialogical and playful. It is precisely in this dialectic of "death" and "life" that literary activity gains its true vitality and freedom.

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