

Authorship between presence and absence

Conf.dr. Steluța STAN
Universitatea „Dunărea de Jos” din Galați

Abstract: *Language is no longer only a means that authors use to tell their truths about their reality, it even creates that truth about that reality. Saussure and Derrida opened Pandora's box for a world of critics ready to foreground their activity while low-profiling that of writers; from the former's perspective, nothing that we can know through language and through text can be known as anything but language, as text. From this point on, it is not difficult to understand why the very idea of author or writer is one of the first things to be degraded.*

Key words: authorship, deconstructivism, post-structuralism, reality, scriptor

Much literary criticism in the 20th century, from I.A. Richards's Practical Criticism to the American New Criticism, from structuralism to poststructuralism and deconstruction, from modernism to postmodernism, has been theoretically formalistic, turning its back (at least, in principle) on the worldly side of textual life, oddly rejecting the connection between *WORD* (language and writing) and *WORLD*, preferring the former at the expense of the latter in textual discussions and theory. We have understood by now the reasons for that.

On the one hand, this came as a reaction to so many professional readers of books having made the world, the context, history such a shibboleth, such an important criterion for assigning artistic value. The domination of expressionism (characteristic of Romantic aestheticism and its belief in the uniqueness of the act of creation as a consequence of the uniqueness of the creative individual) begins to decline in the second half of the 19th century, when the strong and close relationship that authors had with their texts was getting weaker. The author's intention of communicating ideas is replaced by *productive intention*, the text not the author engaging in a dialogic relationship with the reader, a new type of reader this time, invited to participate in and contribute to the text's production. To relativize and to attenuate the authorial instance are frequently believed to be reference points for modernist literature, which also meant the decline of the myth of the inspired poet, the Romantic prototype of the creative genius, valued for his sincerity, spontaneity, and imagination. The feeling of the author separated from his work can be sensed even while the

piece of writing is being written, and becomes clear the very moment the work is done.

What has been called *objective criticism* (*Practical Criticism* in Great Britain, *Russian Formalism*, *New Criticism* in the United States) dominated the study of literature in schools and universities until the '80s. This critical method lays the stress on the analysis of the text, of the work itself, free from its author, public, or the extra-linguistic universe.

On the other hand, it resulted from the extraordinary confusion that has reigned in criticism ever since American and English critics came to what professor Valentine Cunningham calls "readings, misreadings, or invented readings of Saussure's *Cours de linguistique générale*" (1994: 17) (his lectures given in Geneva before the First World War). A most inconvenient effect was the attraction that these exerted upon structuralists and later on poststructuralists, triggering the widespread fashion for demeaning the inspection of origins, despising and downgrading authors, authorities, historical and biographical criticism, intentionalism, and so forth. Declaring the question of origins off limits, critical theory has proved once again self-serving.

It seems that if Saussure had not existed, he would have been invented, which, to a certain extent is what happened since the *Cours* was cobbled together posthumously from students' notes. What some critics, supporters of the "presence of the great absentee", consider to have gone wrong is when the proposition that linguistic signs are arbitrary, the same as the relation between them and the worldly entity they refer to, gets extended to deny that signs are related to the world at all and to suggest that languages, the same as texts, exist quite cut off from the things and the world that they seem to refer to. As long ago as 1939 Émile Benveniste argued most convincingly that, once a sign is in place, in use, the relationship between signifier (the pointing finger) and signified/referent is not arbitrary but necessary; if the linguistic sign is arbitrary *a priori*, it ceases to be so *a posteriori*; for the speaking subject, there is complete equation between language and reality, the verbal systems not being independent of what they point to; the sign recuperates and controls reality, or, better still, *it is that reality* (Benveniste, 1966: 49 ff).

The literary critics in the English-speaking world have been rather unaffected by what Roman Jakobson called a "beautiful demonstration" of the fact that linguistic difference cannot exclude linguistic reference, even Marxists and feminists, theologians and other ideologues have preferred the extensions of Saussure's linguistics that gather around the name of Jacques Derrida (in

brief, a thinker who made it his business to tell us that things are more complicated than we trust them to be).

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Beginning with the '70s, what was traditionally understood by the connections between the universe, the author, the reader and the work has been troubled by Structuralism and Deconstructivism, both questioning even the most elementary mimetism of language and, consequently, of literature; moreover, the structuralists and the deconstructivists attack what was taken for certain (and granted), that there is a stable relationship between words, their meaning and the things outside the text that they are a symbol of. Language is no longer only a means that authors use to tell the/their truth about their reality, it even creates that truth about that reality.

Derrida's '*Il n'y a pas de hors-texte*' in *Of Grammatology* (1967), translated as 'there is no outside-text' (as opposed to 'inside-text') or 'there is nothing outside the text' made literary critics believe that literature, texts, in general, exclude or suspend reference, history, reality, being. In the early seventies Derrida turned to the context, trying to express his deep hurt at being taken as intending anything else, pointing to the fact that "the text is not the book [...]. It does not suspend reference – to history, to the world, to reality, to being, and especially not to the other [...] *Différance* is a reference and viceversa." Derrida, 1988: 137).

Considering Derrida's assertion about everything being a text, professor Valentine Cunningham, reputed name on the British scene of literary history and criticism, admits that Derrida's is a most important stand in the post-war criticism but nuances it. Cunningham's position becomes explicit from the stand he takes towards concepts which some radical post-structuralist theories banter, when they do not directly reject: God, author, truth, and so on:

[...] odată discreditată ideea că pot exista enunțuri cu valoare de adevăr, oricât am intra în probleme de validitate a adevărului, ceea ce implică discuția despre realitate, imaginație, ficțiune etc., ne poticnim evident. ... odată discreditată ideea că este datoria scriitorului să redea cât poate mai bine adevărul, ajungem ireparabil într-un impas. De aceea sunt de părere că este periculos să

se persifleze ideea că adevărul este un scop, fie în literatură, ori în critică. (Cunningham, in Anghelescu Irimia 1999: 119-120).

Derrida's rebutting, due mostly to Michel Foucault and other Leftists' jeers about the apparent rejection of history, does not make much of a difference. He had opened Pandora's box for a world full of critics ready to come to the fore; he had offered them a perspective from which nothing that we can know through language and text can be known as anything but language, as text. From that point on it is not difficult to understand why, for all Derrida's protests, the idea of Benveniste's speaking subject, and, in particular, the idea of the author or writer, is one of the first things to be vigorously degraded.

Thus, New (post)structuralism chimes in with the old New Criticism's resistance to the so-called Biographical Fallacy. The very idea of authorship, of personal origins for utterance keeps up the old metaphysical ideas of divine or quasi-divine creativity, authority, which the foregrounding of linguisticity is designed to subvert, to undermine. Heidegger had declared in 1957 in Nietzschean vein that the language or the writing is what writes, not the person at the desk, not some human entity mistakenly known for all these years, deludedly, as the writer.

Roland Barthes is free now to declare 'The Death of the Author' (1968), in which he tries to replace the author with the scriptor. At this point, it is necessary to mention that this characterizes his structuralist period, since he will also have a post-structuralist one, in which he will find it fit to nuance his position towards the authorial instance (see *Le Chambre claire/Camera Lucida*, 1982, published in France in 1980, in, very interestingly, the very extensive *Écrivains de toujours* series of tomes about writers, built on biographical, autobiographical, historical, author-centred assumptions):

The Author, when believed in, is always conceived of as the past of his own book: book and author stand automatically on a single line divided into a before and an after. The Author is thought to nourish the book, which is to say that he exists before it, thinks, suffers, lives for it, is in the same relation of antecedence to his work as a father to his child. In complete contrast, 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; there is no other time than that of the enunciation and every text is eternally written here and now... We know now that a text is not a line of words releasing a single 'theological' meaning (the 'message' of the Author-God) but a multidimensional space in which a variety of writings, none of them original, blend and clash. (Barthes 1968, in Lodge 1990: 15).

In other words, the scriptor, unlike the author, willingly accepts to lose his own structure and the world's in the structure of the word. The much debated on relationship between the *author/(already) scriptor/producer* and his *work/(already) writing* is seen as a relationship of relationships, not as a mere causal one between a life and a piece of writing.

In the structuralist view there is no single meaning in literary works. This insistence on the *plurality of meanings* in a text (Barthes says that if words only had one dictionary meaning, there would be no literature) is the logical consequence of the *absence of any authorial intention in literature*; the author's absence is far more radical than it is in the case of the New Critics. The New Critics highlight *the organic coherence* of the literary text which takes over the task of unifying meaning; thus, the author can be done without. In structuralist theory there is nothing to take over this task, so that ambiguity becomes polysemic, consisting of an unreconcilable multiplicity of meanings.

To counterbalance the radical poststructuralist assertions claiming that the creation and reading of literature have nothing to do with the author as a real person, and that literature exists quite independently of the author's particular circumstances and personality, we have found equally famous names.

Thus, if Barthes sought to replace 'author' with the term 'scriptor' and announced "the death of the author", sentencing to death not the person but his authority and his "clinging" to his writing after it was done, the British writer, critic and professor, David Lodge, replies: "Now my first reaction as a novelist is to contest these remarks – to say to Barthes that I do feel a kind of parental responsibility for the novels I write, that the composition is, in an important sense, my past, that I do think, suffer, live for a book while it is in progress..." (Lodge 1990: 15).

Moreover, he considers that the way in which fiction is produced, circulated and received in the culture is totally at odds with the assertions of Barthes:

The reception of new writing has in fact probably never been more obsessively author-centred than it is today, not only in reviewing, but in supplementary forms of exposure through the media interviews and profiles in the press and on TV, prizes, public readings and book launches and so on. All this attention is focused on the author as a unique creative self, the mysterious, glamorous origin of the text... (Lodge 1990: 15-16).

Yet, he admits that such extreme formulations, as Barthes', may seem attractive because they discourage a reductively empiricist reading of one's work, a reading that tends to treat the text as a sign of something more concrete, more authentic, more real, which the writer could, if he or she cared to, hand over in its raw and naked truth. He also admits that criticism delving into the biographical origins of one's fiction, seeking to establish a perfect fit between the novelist's personal identity and his *oeuvre* may become oppressive to the author. And he cites Graham Greene, who, in a passage in *Ways of Escape*, says that there comes a time when the established writer:

is more afraid to read his favourable critics than his unfavourable, for with terrible patience they unroll before his eyes the unchanging pattern in the carpet. If he has depended a great deal on his unconscious, and his ability to forget even his own books when they are once on the public shelves, his critics remind him - this theme originated ten years ago, that simile which came so unthinkingly to his pen a few weeks back was used nearly twenty years ago... (Greene, in Lodge 1990: 16).

Another voice rising against 'the banishing of the author from the city', a voice supporting the idea that literary criticism is not disinterested when advocating the author's downgrading, is that of Donald E. Pease. He states that for literary exegesis, the complete disparagement of the concept of author meant the promise of a spectacular substitution by means of which the critic appeared as an epiphany of the authorship: "Whereas Barthes declares that the author is dead, the text he thereby produces is not without an author. In Barthes' criticism the author returns but in the displaced form of Barthes' metatextual account of the writing activity. In this view, then, the critic is the real beneficiary of the separation of an author from a text" (Pease, in Lentricchia 1995: 112).

Beyond any dispute for supremacy between the author, on the one hand, and the critic, on the other, the former persists in not letting himself driven away or even annihilated. Many times, to the critic's despair, culture keeps paying respect and homage to the author, or even, in Liviu Papadima's words: "ea continua să-și mitologizeze scriitorii, ... asimilându-i unor repere simbolice cardinale ..." (Papadima 1999: 19).

In the chapter 'At the Gates of Commonsense' in *British Desperadoes at the Turn of the Millenium*, professor Lidia Vianu comments on what she considers to be an example of intelligible criticism that de-constructs in an ironically de-constructivist manner, and de-flates some of the post-modernist and post-

structuralist 'airs'. The Bradbury/Lodge tribute (the British scene seems to be the environment that provides the oil that calms the permanently troubled American and, especially, French waters, or more simply put, the British way with big theory) to Derrida's *Signéponge* (translated in English as *Signsponge* in 1984) is a critico-documentary fiction entitled *My Strange Quest for Mensonge, Structuralism's Hidden Hero* (1987), which begins with Michel Foucault's question in the essay 'What Is an Author?': "What difference does it make who is speaking?" Here is a list of short quotations that seem to have no need for supplementary comments (Bradbury, in Vianu 1999: 123-127):

[...] thanks to Deconstruction, truth is very much an open question.

[...] the age of the floating signifier, when word no longer attaches properly to thing.

[...] far from thought being written in language, language was writing thought, and not doing it well.

The wind of change was blowing everywhere, and the day of the modern reader who did not read a book at all was born.

What everyone was waiting for, everyone needed, was the coming of the centreless centre, the presentless present, the writerless writing, the signless sign that would draw everything together and put it into its true lack of relation.

It (Mensonge's book) also had considerable appeal for British critics, who had always taken the view that all authors were dead anyway, or if they were not then they should be.

Mensonge, in fact, has hardly ever been seen or heard speaking. He is the core of mystery. He did not write, yet his book was published and vanished. He is the author who denies himself: he is the absent absence, helping the deconstructivists' dream come true.

Literary criticism meticulously sets about deconstructing "the author as a person." The death of the author, prerequisite for the birth of the reader, is explained by the Deconstructionist author, who gets all the attention, while the original book is dead and buried. *He* is to become the author (remember Pease?). Bradbury calls this an "illogicality", but he actually means fraud. He explains that Mensonge's "non-presence is exactly what constitutes his authority, or rather, precisely, his lack of it" (ibidem, 126). The "supreme negation" makes Bradbury split with laughter, still hide this heresy under the cult of Mensonge (lie). The great man declares: "This is not the book I did not write, (...) and I refuse to acknowledge it as not mine" (ibidem, 127).

Taking all this with a pinch of French or better English salt, we have seen that, once postmodernism settled in literature, one can easily notice a sudden change (for the better, we daresay) in the authorial instance and in the interest in the person beyond the work; literary genres previously considered as marginal (memories, autobiographies, confessions, diaries) have been reconsidered. This should not be all that surprising: it is in practice impossible to talk about texts without the presence of a presumed writing hand and of the person the hand belongs to, and (sooner or later) the history, the context, the ideology, the whole matrix of that person, invading the discussion, as these had no doubt previously invaded the text. Which only proves that the magic Derridian sponge could not sponge away, even if it tried, a Dickens or a Joyce or a Shakespeare.

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