

Death of the Author: Before and After

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ABSTRACT--- *When Roland Barthes announced the death of the author in the 1960's, the sentence did not come as a surprise because he/she had been dying for a long time. This paper traces the process of his death by exploring his various functions as envisioned by critics and the fluctuating relation between him and the reader, a process that ended with the birth of the reader as a dynamic force in the making of the literary work. However, the rise of the reader has had its consequences which are not all happy as regards the integrity and value of literature as such.*

Keywords--- author, reader, function, dynamic, death, deconstruction

1. INTRODUCTION

The classical dictum that literature should aim to teach and please has had a long history and has taken various shapes and forms with the two poles author/reader receiving varying emphasis by different literary schools. It is this relation between author and reader that constitutes the backbone of this paper, along with the place of each in the literary process, a process which led to the death of the author and the triumph of the reader. Excluding Sidney, since he represents the classical principle to a great extent, the paper will survey the most notable variations of the relation while pinpointing its most influential figures and discussing its consequences, which, in my opinion, have not been always felicitous.

2. METHODOLOGY

The paper traces the development of the diminishing authority of the author in the history of European literary criticism. The starting point is Samuel Taylor Coleridge since his imperative that the reader should willingly suspend his disbelief became an icon in this history. The concluding position came towards the end of the twentieth century. So, the appropriate method is a historical discussion and analysis of the concepts involved in the study.

3. DATA

In Chapter 14 of his *Biographia Literaria* Coleridge outlines the division of labor agreed upon between him and Wordsworth in *Lyrical Ballads*, published in 1798. Wordsworth was "to propose to himself as his object to give the charm of novelty to things of every day, and to excite a feeling analogous to the supernatural by awakening the mind's attention from the lethargy of custom and directing it to the loveliness and the wonders of the world before us" (Norton 2: 397). Coleridge, on the other hand, was to move in the opposite direction. He was to direct his endeavors "to persons and characters supernatural, or at least romantic, yet so as to transfer from our inward nature a semblance of truth sufficient to procure for these shadows of imagination that willing suspension of disbelief for the moment, which constitutes poetic faith" (Norton 2: 397).

Coleridge's statement, which has become an iconic pronouncement on the relation between author and reader, was meant to refer specifically to his poem "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner" in *Lyrical Ballads*. The poem is a literary ballad, traditionally a narrative song where the supernatural element is an integral part; it deals with the supernatural as regards the Mariner's experience and power, while it awakens in the reader a human interest in its overall plot and characters. For this contractual bond to be viable, Coleridge calls for a "willing suspension of disbelief" on the part of the reader to render the work enjoyable. This defines his position: for the reader to enjoy the work, he must willingly suspend his disbelief. Thus, he caters for only one part of the classical dictum. The poem justifies the call and underscores it.

In this same vein of authority, Coleridge compares such an attitude to faith, not religious but poetic. The analogy should not go without comment. It is not accidental nor gratuitous. The decree comes at a crucial time in his religious development. It is not very relevant nor helpful in this context to go through Coleridge's theological journey as traced by Richard Tuss in his work *Samuel Taylor Coleridge: A Theologian for our Time*. It suffices for our purposes to refer to Stopford Augustus Brooke, who, in Tuss' opinion, "suggests that 'The Rime of the Ancient Mariner' is the last evidence of his true theology, and evidences this not in the great theme of fall and redemption, but in the famous lines of the 'happy ending': 'He prayeth well, who loveth well. Both man and bird and beast'" (qtd. in Tuss 3).

A more uncompromising position on the same topic is taken by John Keats, a fellow Romantic who is also privileged with another memorable, though puzzling, icon. In a letter to George and Thomas Keats, dated Dec. 21(?), 1821, he speaks of the poet's "negative capability," (Norton 2: 867), which forms "a Man of Achievement especially in Literature and which Shakespeare possessed so enormously" (Norton 2: 867). It is marked by being "capable of being in uncertainties, Mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact and reason" (867), a sort of a man possessed, a statement somehow foreshadowed by Classical philosophers. Keats goes on to elaborate, "This pursued through Volumes would perhaps take us no further than this, that with a great poet the sense of Beauty overcomes every other consideration, or rather obliterates all consideration" (867). In other words, the great poet's only obligation is to Beauty not to Truth nor to the reader. Such a position is to be accepted notwithstanding his pronouncement "Beauty is truth, truth beauty" in his "Ode on a Grecian Urn," a pronouncement which muddles his position, and which has engendered more questions than answers. It also underlines the discrepancy we often encounter between the poet's theoretical position and practical achievements.

In the Victorian Age Arnold's position regarding the reader as an object to be taught, cheered and entertained, is summed up in "The Study of Poetry." Here, Arnold goes so far that he sanctifies poetry in the same context. The Victorian poet-critic, announcing the demise of religion due to its establishing itself on fact, reinstates poetry in its place simply because poetry's throne is made of ideas, "... for poetry the idea is everything; the rest is a world of illusion, of divine illusion. Poetry attaches its emotion to the idea; the idea is the fact. The strongest part of our religion today is its unconscious poetry" (Norton 2: 1444). He adds, "Poetry, to deserve such a glorious position, must be of a high order of excellence" (1445). He borrows a statement from Sainte-Beuve that declares that in art "charlatanism shall find no entrance" (1445). Such poetry "has a power of forming, sustaining and delighting us, as nothing else can" (1445), under the conditions "fixed by the laws of poetic truth and poetic beauty" (1463).

In fiction things developed somehow belatedly but more firmly. A contemporary of Arnold suddenly announced the birth of the reader as a presence to be reckoned with. This began in 1847 when the eponymous protagonist of Charlotte Bronte's *Jane Eyre* called upon the reader to hear the unexpected news, "Reader, I married him" (444), inviting him to be emotionally involved in the action at this moment of great significance. She addresses him again a few lines down, "You have not quite forgotten little Adele, have you, reader" (445). Additionally, we all know that Dickens had to change the ending of his novel *Great Expectations* at the request or advice of some of his friends who thought a happy resolution would be better to please the audience. The two endings are often published in the same edition. So, as early as 1847 the reader was becoming somehow integral to the novel and to the novelist's consciousness. Actually, the reader and writer began to develop a common consciousness. Thus, as royal and aristocratic patronage declined and ultimately vanished, publishing became more and more a business; hence, this demand for a sellable work was becoming an economic pressure.

Having surveyed a selection of some main trends in the author-reader relation we come now to the twentieth century, which, definitely, was not the age of the author. The critical scene presents a war of ideas, of theories and counter theories, tense and entangled. Wherever the emphasis lies, the author's godly will is gone and so is the reader's faith therein. Barthes' death of the author" and birth of the reader may rightly be regarded more as a critically expedient decree than a well-argued academic conclusion. It may be rightly said that Barthes only announced the demise of the author; he did not perpetrate it. It was "... the epitome and culmination of capitalist ideology, which has attached the greatest importance to the 'person' of the author..." (Newton 155).

Indications of the author's loss of authority permeate the Modern Age in a shift towards the study of literature as such. In Potebnja's view "Poetry and prose are linguistic phenomena" (qtd. in Victor Erlich 23). Ejxenbaum voices his "impatience with the 'naïve realism' at the base of the current preoccupation with the writer's life" (qtd. in Erlich 71). Shklovsky, a great spokesman of Russian Formalism, brings all this to a head in his article "Art as Technique" (Newton 23-25). Such critical concepts as "deviation from the norm," "breaking the norm," "defamiliarization," and "baring the device" become dominant in the stage, as one may readily find in Newton and Erlich.

Shifting the emphasis from the author to society is another indication in this process of divesting the author of his central position. Medvedev and Bakhtin see the work of art as the product of the environment-- literary, ideological, and socioeconomic. These become the background of the work, not the author. They state, "The genuine concrete historical study of the artistic work is only possible when all these conditions are observed (Newton 31). The Marxist position is best represented by Christopher Caudwell's idea of "commodity fetishism" (Newton 88) and by Georg Lukacs's distinction between two kinds of realisms in his essay "Critical Realism and Socialist Realism" (Newton 89-92).

New criticism carries the Russian Formalists' message to the West with rich contribution of its own. The biographical approach has been discredited and eventually abolished with I. A. Richards' "pseudo-statement" (Newton 41) and Cleanth Brooks' "form is meaning" (Newton, 45). Now intention is not in the author, but, as Brooks believes, in the work,

that which is "realized" (Newton 46). Here we notice that there is a shift to the reader, or the ideal reader as Brooks calls him, "a central point of reference from which he [the formalist critic] can focus upon the structure of the poem or novel" (Newton 46-7).

With the shift towards literature as such, there came the emergence of the reader as participant in the making of texts and meaning. Here meaning is no more the privilege of the author, but a dialogical product both synchronically and diachronically. This began with T. S. Eliot in his essay "Tradition and the Individual Talent." He states, "No poet, no artist of any art, has his complete meaning alone. His significance, his appreciation is the appreciation of his relation to the dead poets and artists" (20th C 72). Accordingly, in this impersonal theory of poetry, the meaning and value of a poem lie in connection with the whole bulk of poetry composed before it, "To divert interest from the poet to the poetry is a laudable aim" (20th C 76).

The Russian critic Mikhail Bakhtin (1959-1975) was moving in the same direction. Actually, dialogy is mainly attributed to him. In his headnote to Mikhail Bakhtin, David Lodge asserts that for the Russian critic "... language in use is essentially 'dialogic', every speech act springing from previous utterances and being structured in expectation of a future response ..." (*Modern* 124). Put differently, this means "... a given utterance may be, not just the representation of something in the world, but also a representation of another speech act about that thing" (*Modern* 125). In other words, a speech act suggests another speech act about something and that another, indefinitely. What this interaction of representations amounts to is that meaning is no more in the instant speech act itself but in what is suggested in the mind of the addressee. Thus, meaning is located somewhere between the sender and the receiver.

Another contribution by Bakhtin relates to the novel. It began with a study of two major novelists in Western literature, Dostoevsky (1929; revised 1963) and Rabelais (written in 1966; published in 1966). His major theoretical work on the novel is his "from the prehistory of novelistic discourse" (*Modern* 125-156). Here he aims to distinguish two world views, one unified, authoritarian and monoglotic; the other varied, discursive and polyglotic. Epic, tragedy and the lyric belong to the former, the novel to the latter (140). Historically, the change was triggered by parody, travesty, laughter, and holiday spirit ("from the prehistory"). Specifically, dialogy is a key word in this regard, "To a greater or lesser extent, every novel is a dialogized system made up of the images of 'languages,' styles and consciousnesses that are concrete and inseparable from language" (*Modern* 131). So, what characterizes the novel is not only diversity but also multiplicity. According to Michael Holoquist, "In Bakhtin there is no one meaning being striven for; the world is a vast congeries of contesting meanings, a heteroglossia so varied that no single term capable of unifying its diversifying energies is possible" (24). All this amounts to a declaration of the role of the reader in naturalizing a novel.

Thus, the integrity and objectivity of the work is shaken. This is the new spirit in literary criticism. In the introduction as editor to the book *Reader-Response Criticism: from Formalism to Post-Structuralism*, Jane P. Tompkins writes, "The objectivity of the text is the concept that these essays [of the book], whether they intended it or not, eventually destroy (x). Undoubtedly, Iser remains one of the most influential figures in this new school of criticism. His book *The Act of Reading: A Theory of Aesthetic Response*, originally published in Munich in 1976 and then by the Johns Hopkins University Press in 1978, is a landmark in the field, addressing almost all of its aspects. It is, of course, impossible to condense the book in a paragraph or two, but Iser's central thesis is not so difficult to grasp, "So long as the focal point of interest was the author's intention, or the contemporary, psychological, social, or historical meaning of the text, or the way in which it was constructed, it scarcely seemed to occur to critics that the text could only have a meaning when it was read"(20). Such focus on the reader would ultimately lead to interest in types of readers, and Iser has his types in this area: fictitious(33), hypothetical(34), ideal(27), implied(27), informed(30), intended(30), real(28), and superreader (30).

The dynamic concept underlying the reading process is interaction between the reader and the literary work. This is true because "fictional texts constitute their own objects and do not copy something already in existence" (24). Therefore, "they cannot have the total determinacy of real objects"(24). This indeterminacy is what enables "the text to 'communicate' with the reader"(24). Thus, "the relative indeterminacy of a text allows a spectrum of actualizations"(24), without making comprehension "arbitrary"(24), since the indeterminacy is only relative. So, reading is a two way process, and the reader's freedom is controlled by the text. This is where we can locate the emergence of literary democracy, with a spectrum of actualizations governed by the laws of the text. Iser warns, "This does not imply that the meaning must, consequently, be purely subjective; although it requires the subject to produce and experience it, the very existence of alternatives makes it necessary for a meaning to be defensible and so intersubjectively accessible"(230).

Simultaneously, a new school of criticism called Deconstruction was developing at the same time. A radical school by all measures, as the name rightly indicates, it seeks to show that texts suffer from what Harold Bloom in his "The Breaking of Form" calls "an over-determination of language and consequently under-determination of meaning"(*Deconstruction and Criticism* 12). This leads him to say that "...all critical reading aspiring towards strength must be as transgressive as it is aggressive" (6-7). Thus, "... there are no texts but only interpretations" (7), only readings

by readers. For Jacques Derrida, the mastermind of Deconstruction, a text is ... no longer a finished corpus of writing, some content enclosed in a book or its margins, but a differentiated network, a fabric of traces referring endlessly to something other than itself, to other differential traces" (*Deconstruction and Criticism* 84). This argument raises the question, "What are the borderlines of a text?" (85)

4. CONCLUSION

After this brief survey of the interaction of the author/text/reader triangle, where were we at the end of the twentieth century? The author's authority dwindled to a bare minimum, almost to nothing. The text rose to a state of prominence. Above all, in what appeared to be a populist move, the reader was enthroned as absolute authority with the power to make or unmake the text whether as a constructive or deconstructive reader. So, we won the reader but lost interpretation in what seemed to be a Hollywood culture in spite of the fact that we still had interpretive communities. We also lost evaluation, with no attention paid to what constituted literary excellence. In the final analysis, literature was slipping towards uncharted territory.

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