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**The Phantom Walking the Text:
The Death of the Author Reconsidered.**

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The author was killed by Roland Barthes in 1968 in the essay "The Death of the Author". This was an act of euthanasia, forming part of a larger poststructuralist project of putting down obdurate rhetorical practices in literature, where the endorsement of myths like authenticity, the representational value of language, the idea of the final analysis, according to Barthes, had unreasonably governed the ways in which literature was written, read and understood. The Author figured as a mark of power, as the authority of a closed sign-system, dictating, or centralising, the ways in which a text must be read. With the author over and done with and the general rhetorical ploys of narration demasked, stripping language to represent nothing but itself, the stage was set for a new understanding (and practice) of literature as a particularly decentred and liberating zone that would seize on any form of power discourse - history, anthropology, politics, religion, etc - still abusing the powers of deception in language in the interest of the speaker. As Barthes puts it:

Writing is the destruction of every voice, of every point of origin. Writing is that neutral, composite, oblique space where our subject slips away, the negative where all identity is lost, starting with the very identity of the body writing (142).

And he continues:

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, this disconnection occurs, the voice loses its origin, the author enters into his own death, writing begins (142).

Barthes was of course criticising the prestige of the individual, the tendency to attach the greatest importance to the 'person' of the author and the idea that the text made up the voice of a single person, "the author 'confiding' in us" (143). Naturally, I agree

with Barthes that the text is more than its author. The text has a life of its own, breathed into it by, for instance, the centripetal forces of ambiguity and by multiple readers' diverse responses to it. My point is, however, that the notion of text as authorless fails to alert us to the conditioning powers of rhetoric which I see as an inevitable and equally significant element in literature. As far as I am concerned, the two quotations above provoke a question each in this regard. Can writing really ever be a "neutral" space where identity and origin are lost, regardless of how "composite" and "oblique" it gets? And secondly, is it possible to write anything without the slightest interest in influencing the world, and, if not, is it possible for the thing you have created to break loose from, or be cut loose from, the intentions you vested in it? The short answer for me is no. In fact, I believe that Barthes, by divesting the text of the relevancy of its author (meaning the historical, political, social, cultural, etc., circumstances of its creation),¹ has played it into the hands of another myth – the idea that literature is a special discursive zone that can escape rhetoric and the discursive limitations imposed by authorial power. Our "subject slips away" and, by retreating into an "intransitive" relation with the world, so does our object - in marked distinction from other forms of speech and writing which are determined by their speakers (subjects) who use language "with a view to acting directly on reality", that is, directing the perception of the listener/reader with self-interested aims in mind (objects). As much as Barthes' theory gets rid of an authority dictating how texts must be read, he also exempts texts from discursive accountability. Contrary to Barthes, Wayne Booth has argued that the author can never be expelled from the house of fiction. Regardless of what ploys authors adopt, they can only disguise themselves, never disappear: "we must never forget that though the author can to some extent choose his disguises, he can never choose to disappear" (20). According to Booth, all art presupposes the artist's choice. Despite all ideals, the author still wants to communicate something and he wants to optimise that communication through the use of rhetoric – choosing strategies of suspense (as he does not want to lose his readers), making sure dramatic moments are heightened not obscured, conceiving ways in which to achieve the greatest effect of irony, the greatest effect of inconsistency and so on (Booth, 52, 63). Booth concludes that the author "cannot choose whether to use rhetorical heightening. His only choice is of the kind of rhetoric he will use" (116). Likewise an author may

strive to withhold judgement, but can never escape some form of commitment in one way or another (83). This also applies to works that seem to empty themselves of all meaning: "Most so-called nihilistic works are, however, really works of active protest or even of affirmation, however impersonal the mode in which they are written.... They confuse the reader about one group of norms, only to impose another." As such, there is "always a reliable witness to be found somewhere" and ultimately "[a]ll stories, even the most seemingly neutral, depend in what they say and in their silences, on appeals to moral, political and religious judgements" (299, 419). So to Booth, as to me, the discursive finality of a text is intricately connected with the author who has written the text.

It may be argued that if we cut the link between author and text, the text is problematically elevated to a state of neutral purity. When the author has died, says Barthes, "it is language which speaks, not the author" (143):

...to write is, through a perquisite impersonality (not at all to be confused with the castrating objectivity of the realist novelist), to reach that point where only language acts 'performs', and not me.... Text ceases to operate as a "recording, notation, representation, 'depiction' (as the Classics would say); rather it designates... a performative, a rare verbal form... in which the enunciation has no other content (contains no other proposition) than the act by which it is uttered.... For him [the dead author], on the contrary, the hand, cut off from any voice, borne by pure gesture of inscription (and not of expression), traces a field without origin – or which, at least, has no other origin than language itself, language which ceaselessly calls into question all origins (143, 145-6).

Likewise, the Author, who was traditionally believed to exist before the text, like the father of a child, nourishing the book into existence, is replaced by a "modern sriptor who is born simultaneously with the text", enunciating a text which is "eternally written *here and now*" (145). "Succeeding the Author, the sriptor no longer bears within him passions, humours, feelings, impressions, but rather this immense dictionary from which he draws a writing that can know no halt" (147). In all this, one senses the traditional desire for art to transcend the finitude of human artifice, to escape being a product of man, and become as spontaneous as natural objects and physical events that *speak for*

themselves - pure showing freed of all telling, pure enunciation freed of all non-poetic elements like statement and discourse. As I see it, the danger in Barthes' theory is that it takes life and agency away from the Author and transfers it all onto what then becomes the Text. In this way, he grants literature a particular status as a non-hierarchical, auto-causal body organically existing in and for itself.

Without the Author, literature lends itself to us as a space of discursive evanescence and inclusivity, a Bakhtinian heteroglossia, in which a limitless number of languages may co-exist and destabilise each other. As Barthes puts it:

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. The text is a tissue of quotations drawn from the innumerable centres of culture (146).

This multidimensionality makes it possible for literature not only to unfix meaning and hierarchies of power, but perpetually to avoid fixing any meaning itself:

In precisely this way literature (it would be better from now on to say *writing*), by refusing to assign a 'secret', an ultimate meaning to the text (and to the world as text), liberates what may be called an anti-theological activity, an activity that is truly revolutionary since to refuse to fix meaning is, in the end, to refuse God and his hypostases – reason, science, law (147).

Basically, "Writing ceaselessly posits meaning ceaselessly to evaporate it, carrying out a systematic exemption of meaning" (147). I agree with Barthes, and Bakhtin, that there is a polyphony of languages in a literary text. The mere presence of multiple languages fuses diverse areas of meaning and disperses coherency in established ways of thinking, which in turn opens language up to a rich process of interpretation and re-interpretation. This liquefies the form and structures of meaning in the text, confirming its autonomy. The language of the text becomes performative, exercising the deterritorialising capacity of literature. As Deleuze and Guattari put it, there are intrinsic elements of transformation in language that dissolve forms, that take flight from contours "in favor of fluid forces,

flows, air, light, and matter, such that a body or word does not end at a precise point” (109)

But if we view literature only from this side, we ignore the reterritorialising instances in literature, the power of language to condition the ways in which we think about the world. No matter how ephemeral or evanescent the language of a text is, it will never escape that other quality of language: giving form to a formless reality. Along with the capacity of language to escape form, Deleuze and Guattari warn that “Language is made not to be believed but to be obeyed, and to compel obedience.... Language is not life; it gives life orders. Life does not speak; it listens and waits. Every order-word, even a father’s to his son, carries a little death sentence – a Judgement, as Kafka put it” (76). This other side to literature may be designated as instances where the text and the meaning of the text narrow down and close the proliferation of meaning, the text as performance is slowed down by the text as discourse. True, the text may not be controlled by an Author-God issuing a “single ‘theological’ meaning.” As said, it will always achieve some life of its own as generations of readers keep breathing new life into it, all at the expense of the author who “enters into his own death”, as Barthes puts it. But the text *has had* an author placed at a certain time in history and in a certain environment who made choices, selected perspectives and points of view, highlighted importance of certain problems while remaining silent about others. All these choices constitute an original authorial intentionality, modified by the autonomous life the text assumes subsequently, but nonetheless leaving its ghostly traces in the text. While appreciating the proliferation of meaning in a text, we must therefore also look for its limitations, its intentionality. The instances that break the endless proliferation of meaning in a text may be seen as the postmortem footsteps of the author, the author’s phantom walking the text. The author is dead, but his ghost still continues to haunt what we read. This is not unlike Booth’s idea of the implied author who is not the actual person who wrote the work, but a “second self”, a certain voice implied in the work that includes “not only the [work’s] extractable meanings but also the moral and emotional content of each bit of action and suffering of all the characters” (73). As such the implied author furnishes the text with a certain *ethos* - norms and values that run on a subjacent level, beneath, for instance, the narrator’s voice.

As indicated, Barthes' liberation of the text from external intentionality amounts to a mystification of literature, where all the godly authority he, rightly, took away from the Author is transferred onto the Text, replacing one theologising myth with another. Some people will object to this, arguing that the purpose of "The Death of the Author" was to re-empower the reader. I agree with this argument. In fact, as I see it, the entire aim of Barthes' essay was to kill the Author in order to emancipate the reader, "the birth of the reader must be at the cost of the death of the Author" (147), but I also think that the essay fails to do so. Barthes argues that reading is the true place of writing:

Thus is revealed the total existence of writing: a text is made of multiple writings, drawn from many cultures and entering into mutual relations of dialogue, parody, contestation, but there is one place where this multiplicity is focused and that place is the reader, not as was hitherto said, the author. The reader is the space on which all the quotations that make up a writing are inscribed without any of them being lost, a text's unity lies not in its origin but in its destination (148).

In view of this one might think that Barthes indicates that there is a limit to the enunciation of a text after all, by referring to its "unity", and that the reader has a certain amount of power over the text in his/her ability to grasp its entirety, nothing "being lost". Yet this is not necessarily the case. Arguably, the relation Barthes draws between the text and its reader is also a relation of an idealised state of infinitude rather than of worldly finitude. It is understood that the reader's understanding of a text is not embedded in the particular historical circumstances at the time of reading it, as Gadamer would argue.² The reader is as endless, liberated and unconditioned as the text: "Yet this destination [the reader] cannot any longer be personal: the reader [like the text] is without history, biography, psychology; he is simply *someone* who holds together in a single field all the traces by which the written text is constituted" (Barthes, 148). This idealisation of the relation between text and reader ironically robs the reader of influence and thus deflates Barthes' intentions of empowering the reader. While arguing that the reader is the writer of the text, Barthes simultaneously sets a limit as to what we can do with texts: "In the multiplicity of writing, everything is to be *disentangled*, nothing *deciphered*; the structure can be followed, 'run' (like the thread of a stocking) at every point and at every level, but

there is nothing beneath: the space of writing is to be ranged over, not pierced.” Hence we are only true readers, as opposed to conceited Readers or Critics, as long as we dematerialise, or depersonalise, ourselves and enter this idealised state with the text, recognising its impenetrability; we are only readers as long as we open ourselves to receive the multi-dimensionality and endlessness of the text, *experiencing* its performance, without *authorising* ourselves to say anything *about it*, because the text allows nothing to be said about it. Any criticism is thus tantamount to violating the Text, because we deprive it of its auto-causal nature, reduce it to the limits of this world, contaminate the purity of its enunciation with discourse.³ Consequently, the liberty of the reader and the beautiful harmony between reader and text is still dictated by the Text as an ultimately inscrutable phenomenon. The material significance of both the author and the reader fade away in favour of a mystification of the Text.

To acknowledge the author as a ghostly presence of agency in the text is not the same as assigning the ultimate authority of the text to the Author. The text retains a significant degree of vitalism, but is haunted from within itself by death and finitude which brings it down from an elevated state of immortality and endless becoming. One could say that recognising the discursive finitude of a text, the author’s ghostly footsteps, brings balance into the power relation between author, text and reader. The recognition of authorship is the recognition of the text as man-made, as an artifice with a function to influence the world, a recognition that there are instances in the text that are designed to direct our experience of the text and, through that, our experience of the world. Hence the reader is re-empowered to fight back, to *criticise* the text (and its author), to point out its limitations, as the text is no longer a superior, auto-causal phenomenon that can only be appreciated. One can also say that a relation between the author and the reader is *nearly* re-established, yet the fact that the author is dead thwarts any direct line of correspondence from author to reader. The author’s power over the text is sufficiently ethereal for readers to wander around on their own and gather *unauthorised* experiences as long as they are wary of the ghost when it rears its head from the dark recesses and corridors of the text. Thus author, text and readers all become active elements in the construction and interpretation of literature.

To recapitulate, it is necessary to look for authorial ghosts, in the sense of the remnants of social, historical, psychological, philosophical circumstances of the origin of the text, in order to divest the text itself of an empowering mysticism that frees it from agency and accountability. We need authorial figures, not to celebrate them or explain their works autobiographically, but to make them, and especially their hypostases, accountable for the inevitable perspective(s) they represent. The recognition of the author's presence is a recognition of the inescapability of rhetoric and discourse in texts as a human condition.

Barthes says: "To give a text an Author is to impose a limit on that text, to furnish it with a final signified, to close the writing" (147). I could not agree more. We need to recognise authorship, not to put a closure to texts, I agree, but to recognise the instances of *limitation* within texts. To recognise the authorship of a text is to desacralise any idea of the text as a self-causing phenomena, any idea of the text as a superior space of discursive evanescence, with no hooks or handles, whose revolutionary perfection can only expose our own fallibility as readers. The text has been made by somebody, somewhere at some point in time and thus its meaning is not unlimited but will always be tainted with an element of finality.

In view of how easily origin is refuted as myth in much contemporary writing, a reconsideration of the implications of the absence of origin is particularly pertinent today. In fact, the discursive implications of the author's death as mentioned above is reflected in much migrant literature. The argument often goes, in for instance the writings of Salman Rushdie and Homi Bhabha, that origin, roots, etc, are myths that, spellbinding us with their arguments of purity, are designed to keep us in fixed places, to direct the ways in which we experience the world (and texts). It is then suggested that we may actually escape the confining conditions of origin by adopting nomadic perspectives on the world, which are unfixed and pluralist – like the evanescent, polyphonous nature of Barthes' multidimensional text. Accordingly, the reader is often invited into a liberated, free-floating state of thinking in which all normative values and partisan politics seem to have been suspended in a space of heterogeneous inclusion. Interestingly, a common feature in this evolving genre of fiction is that its authors are themselves international migrants in some form or another and base their ethics and poetics on their own postnational

experiences of having defeated myths of limitation. Yet, as with all other literature, migrant fiction is not a revolutionary emancipation of man from the finitude of artificial borders, but the establishment of another optics through which we may choose to view the world with all its consequent limitations and exclusions of other realities. What lies ahead in this connection, then, is the task of mapping the discursive positioning of these migrant writers. We need to trace the ghostly paths of authorial discourse that run beneath the intriguing and mesmerising claims in their fictions to a radically decentred and pluralistic consciousness.

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¹ The following argument does *not* suggest that texts should be interpreted and explained autobiographically on basis of the author's private life. It is an appeal to consider the inescapability of an authorial *argument* in the text, which will always put a certain discursive limit to the proliferation of meaning in the text and make it possible to identify limiting statements for or against something. The authorial argument is then to be understood as the inevitable presence of social, historical, psychological, philosophical circumstances that have shaped writer and the text in one way or the other at the time of its creation.

² For a fine delineation of Gadamer's hermeneutics, see David Weberman's essay: "Gadamer's Hermeneutics and the Question of Authorial Intention" in William Erwin (ed.): *The Death and Resurrection of the Author?*

³ Barthes deprives authority from the Author, and from the Critic as well: "Once the Author is removed, the claim to decipher the text becomes quite futile." This is because criticism allots itself the task of "discovering the Author (or its hypostases: society, history, psyché, liberty) beneath the work: when the Author has been found, the text is 'explained' – victory to the critic." Hence "the reign of the Author has also been that of the Critic" (147).