

The Most Overrated Article of All Time?

by Joshua Landy

This year marks the fiftieth anniversary of an essay you have almost certainly read, if you took any class on literary theory in the intervening half-century. The essay in question is “The Death of the Author,” by a brilliant French thinker named Roland Barthes. Barthes had wonderfully illuminating things to say about the structure of narrative, realism, Proust, Racine, photography, and billboards. When he turned his thoughts to authorship, however, his touch temporarily deserted him, and the essay that resulted is a huge mess, full of unclear claims, weak arguments, and logical contradictions. This generates a double mystery: how did a theorist so smart end up saying such silly things? And—even more inexplicable—why is everyone still being forced to read them? What exactly is it that cements a piece of writing in the canon of literary theory for five decades?

It isn’t always entirely clear what Barthes is trying to say in his essay, but one thing is certain: he wants us to stop thinking of writers when we talk about literary texts. If you imagine that a poem is a vehicle for a writer’s original ideas, he says, you need to wise up—there’s nothing new under the sun. (Texts merely stitch together recycled scraps of culture; the only originality lies in the organization.) And if you imagine that a novel is a vehicle for its writer’s self-expression, you should know, first of all, that there’s no self for her to express and, second, that she couldn’t express it even if she had one. Any sentence she wrote in her own voice could easily be attributed to a character in her book; there could never be a way for readers to tell the difference.

It was a mistake, then, for Western society to invent the author—something we did, apparently, in or around the sixteenth century. And that mistake, far from being innocent, has ruined life both for readers and for society at large. “To give a text an Author,” Barthes explains, “is to impose a limit on that text, to furnish it with a final signified, to close the writing.”¹ Every piece of literature generates multiple meanings all the time, and the clodhopping author is a party pooper, falsely convincing us we have to reduce them to just one. Or rather, since those multiple meanings set off “an activity that is truly revolutionary” (p. 147), authors are actually cops in riot gear shutting down the protest march. There go our chances of saving the world!

There’s nothing wrong, of course, with thinking that we should stop using biographies to explain the power of beautiful poems and glorious novels, or with thinking that writers are not always the best interpreters of their own works. (Amen to both thoughts.) But other scholars had made proposals of that nature long before Barthes, and with careful chains of reasoning. The arguments we find in Barthes are, well, not so great.

First, is it really true that there’s nothing new under the sun? Here’s the way Barthes tries to convince us of that: “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 multi-dimensional space in which a variety of writings, none of them original, blend and clash” (p. 146). That’s a pretty sentence. But what does it mean that we know “*now*”? That rather makes it sound as if there was a time when we *didn’t* know. Someone, at some stage, must have written it down, just as Barthes is doing right here. Which means that there has been at least one piece of writing, in the history of humanity, containing a new idea. Which means that Barthes is contradicting one of his central premises in the very line that articulates it.

It gets worse, I'm afraid: "similar to Bouvard and Pécuchet, those eternal copyists . . . whose profound ridiculousness indicates precisely the truth of writing, the writer can only imitate a gesture that is always anterior, never original" (p. 146). Mmm, delicious despair! But wait a minute—Bouvard and Pécuchet are the eponymous heroes of a novel by Gustave Flaubert. And Barthes thinks their ridiculousness "indicates a truth"—that same truth that we know *now*, according to Barthes, and that we did not know earlier. So here we have a *novel*, not just any old text, indicating a new truth. Which is exactly what Barthes said literature cannot do. Oh dear.

Let's allow Barthes to finish up his thought: "did he [the author] wish to express himself, he ought at least to know that the inner 'thing' he thinks to 'translate' is itself only a ready-formed dictionary, its words only explainable through other words, and so on indefinitely" (p. 146). Take *that*, Romantics! Except . . . who says that the inner thing is made of words? What if, instead of it being a set of statements, it is more like a point of view on the world? (That's what Proust believed, and Proust is someone Barthes rather admires.) In that case, interestingly enough, authors might be able to express the "inner thing" even if Barthes's fever dream—that all we have at our disposal are bits and pieces of cultural flotsam—were true. Think of what T. S. Eliot was able to do in "The Waste Land." Or imagine giving Klee, Kahlo, and O'Keeffe the same collection of pigments and telling them to paint the same tree: the result will be three entirely different canvases. If your aim is to express yourself, you do not necessarily need radically original content; it may be sufficient to have a powerfully original style. But style is something Barthes appears to have forgotten about while writing his famous essay about literature.

All of this is pretty bad, but it may well be Barthes's speculative history that's the worst. "The author is a modern figure," Barthes says, "a product of our society insofar as, emerging from the Middle Ages with English empiricism, French rationalism and the personal faith of the Reformation, it discovered the prestige of the individual. . . . It is thus logical that in literature it should be this positivism, the epitome and culmination of capitalist ideology, which has attached the greatest importance to the 'person' of the author" (pp. 142-43). That is a rampantly mysterious pair of sentences, but if I had to guess, I'd say Barthes is telling us that the author was not in existence before the sixteenth century. (Reformation, capitalism, all that.) Prior to the fifteen hundreds, presumably, people didn't worry too much about who wrote what, or at least didn't try to interpret texts by speculating about authorial intentions.

But my calculator tells me that 405 B.C.E. is before the year 1500 C.E. (Somewhat.) And 405 B.C.E. is when a wonderful play called *The Frogs* was performed in Athens. Somehow the name of its author—Aristophanes—has survived all the way to today, a fact that should already strike us as curious if authors were an invention of capitalism. What's more, two of the characters in *The Frogs* are themselves playwrights, and they too are mentioned by name. And when we meet these characters, Aeschylus and Euripides, we find them arguing about who wrote better tragedies. Unsurprisingly, they and everyone else think of Aeschylus's works as belonging together, unified by a common vision and style, and they and everyone else think of Euripides's works as belonging together in the same way.

It's hard not to conclude that it was entirely possible, in ancient Greece, to care about who wrote what, to understand texts in terms of their authors' intentions, to think of authors as having different styles, to imagine that a given style could be found in various writings by the same author, and to prefer one author to another on the basis of the kind of work each produced. (Oh and yes,

some ancient writers even strove for originality and distinction: Lucretius made a big, Star Trek–like deal of saying that his poem was going “where no foot has ever trod before”² and that he hoped it would bring him fame—fame, the kind of thing people care about when they think of themselves as individuals.) All without the evils of capitalism!

If you put everything together, I think it becomes tempting to see “The Death of the Author” as the single most overrated article in the history of literary theory. It’s by no means the worst—believe me, there’s *way* worse out there. But the ratio of (dragooned) eyeballs to good arguments may simply be unsurpassed.

So what went wrong? How did so brilliant a theorist write such a lousy essay? I have a hunch about that. If you look carefully at “The Death of the Author,” you will see one word coming up over and over: “meaning.” We saw it, for example, in the terrible, horrible, no good, very bad stretch of argument I quoted earlier, where Barthes says that “a text is not a line of words releasing a single ‘theological’ meaning (the ‘message’ of the Author-God).” My suspicion is that Barthes was trained to believe that an author can only have one possible intention—the intention to transmit a message. He then noticed, quite reasonably, that many literary texts are ambiguous and complex. And he concluded, wrongly, that in order to save such books from reductive readings, we have to kill the author.

All Barthes needed to do, really, was to think about a text that is trying to do something *other* than send a message. He had a vast, vast array of choices in front of him. He could have picked a text that deliberately invites several kinds of reading; or a text that invites us to make up our own mind on its central question; or a text that invites us into an unfamiliar conceptual scheme; or a text that helps us see ourselves for who we are; or a text that helps us feel our feelings; or a text that helps us transfigure suffering into something livable; or a text that trains our mental capacities. . . . He would immediately have seen that there are other alternatives to message-hunting than the rather dull task of identifying cultural allusions. He would immediately have seen that to give a text an Author is *not* “to impose a limit on that text, to furnish it with a final signified, to close the writing.” When I say that *The Trial* is by Kafka, I am not remotely implying that *The Trial* can only be interpreted in one way. Indeed, even if I try to read it as I think Kafka wanted me to read it, I am *still* not assigning it a single “signified.” I am doing the *opposite* of reducing it to one idea. There is no need to kill the author in order to read well.

This leaves us with one remaining mystery: why in God’s name are we all still assigning “The Death of the Author”? Why is it so firmly ensconced in the canon of literary theory? I can’t say for sure, but if I had to guess, I’d say it’s a combination of three things. First, it’s exuberant; we literature folk are willing to put up with a lot of argumentative shenanigans if an essay Generates Discussion in the Classroom. (I assign this essay myself, albeit as a cautionary tale.) Second, it presents itself as having real and radical consequences in the actual world of politics. (Get rid of authors, Barthes seems to be saying, and we’ll strike a devastating blow against capitalism.) But I suspect, alas, that the crucial factor is its *length*. Wimsatt and Beardsley, who were telling us to ignore writers some thirteen years before Barthes, made great arguments, but their article takes up twenty pages.³ Alexander Nehamas has even better arguments, but they cover almost as many.⁴ Barthes’s text, by contrast, runs to a mere seven. What does it matter that its reasoning is absurd? Good luck, students of the future: you’ll be reading this piece of nonsense for another fifty years.

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¹ Roland Barthes, "The Death of the Author," trans. Stephen Heath, *Image, Music, Text*, New York: Noonday Press, 1977: 142-8, page 147.

² Lucretius, *On the Nature of the Universe*, trans. R. E. Latham (London: Penguin, 1951), p. 32.

³ W. K. & Wimsatt and Monroe Beardsley, "The Intentional Fallacy," *The Verbal Icon: Studies in the Meaning of Poetry*, Lexington, KY: University of Kentucky Press, 1954: 194-205.

⁴ Alexander Nehamas, "The Postulated Author: Critical Monism as a Regulative Ideal," *Critical Inquiry* 8 (1981): 133-49.