

Roland Barthes and the Influence of the Autobiographical

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In “The Death of the Author,” Barthes argues that a text should not be ascribed a single, ‘correct’ interpretation imposed neither by the author’s intention or the critic’s expertise. Instead, the fluidity of language allows for multiple interpretations, because the text is nothing more than a response to other texts. Thus, Barthes concludes by declaring the birth of the reader as the interpreter of meaning. This shift in focus changed the parameters of literary criticism in ways that have been profoundly influential, having been supported or contested by various schools of thought.

This considered, it is ironic that Barthes’s mature works that responded to events in his life were marked by an increasing tendency towards the personal. This essay considers that Barthes’s contentious essay “The Death of the Author” is not his final word on subjectivity, though it may continue to be perceived as such. Beginning with a close examination of this seminal treatise, this text continues by examining personal influences in Barthes’s later works: his fictionalized autobiography *Roland Barthes*, his tome on photography, *Camera Lucida*, completed shortly after his mother’s death, as well as *Mourning Diary*, where he records his most personal responses to her death. In these later works, his penchant for including autobiographical material reveals Barthes’s continued exploration of subjectivity and the ineluctable presence of a writing body, one’s biographical origins and life circumstances, buried within a text.

Roland Barthes is perhaps best known for “The Death of the Author,” a text that proposed the rejection of the ‘Author’ as authority, echoing the revolutionary sentiments of the late sixties. Clara Claiborne Park in

"Life stories must always be reductive, due to the inherent limitations of language and our own unconscious selection upon ailing mythologies."

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“Author! Author! Reconstructing Roland Barthes” believes that the essay’s revolutionary and hyperbolic language reflected the historical moment in which it was written, during the heady days of the student uprisings¹ in Paris in the spring of 1968.² Noting that Barthes’s language is “permeated with the rhetoric of liberation,” Claiborne Park interprets the text’s rhetoric as a symbolic expurgation of all historic authority figures, including “nothing less than that staple of the sixties, the death of God.”³ Barthes indeed communicates that ‘literature’ must be desacralized in order to be liberated. Questioning the term ‘literature,’ a category that had up until that moment been vested in a hidden but tacit hierarchy, Barthes stresses that “(it would be better from now to say *writing*),”⁴ thus opening up the terminology to include “the world as text.”⁵ He proposes that there is no definitive meaning in a text⁶ waiting to be discovered by the ‘Critic,’ rather looking to “the multiplicity of writing, [where] everything is to be *disentangled*, nothing *deciphered*.”⁷ His words refusing all subordination, he asserts that “to refuse to fix meaning is, in the end, to refuse God and his hypotases – reason, science, law.”⁸ Claiborne Park understands “The Death of the Author” as a reaction against uniquely French problems: namely, the French Academy, which had maintained a political ascendancy over the mother tongue since its “first and continuing project, the codification and purification of French”⁹ thus making “Language [into] a means of control.”¹⁰ Within this framework, Barthes reacted against French Rationalism that imposed its particular (bourgeois) values while also asserting its universality. In the second paragraph of “The Death of the Author,” Barthes refers to the political ideology as a dogma “which has attached the greatest importance to the ‘person’ of the author.”¹¹ Subverting what he perceived as the reification of an ‘Author-God,’¹² Barthes concludes by proposing the “the birth of the reader,”¹³ transferring authorial power to the reader who generates a multiplicity of meanings with each act of reading.

Though the scope of influence of “The Death of the Author” is too broad to address in its entirety, a few threads should be delineated.

First, literary texts were once seen as a “line of words releasing a single ‘theological’ meaning,”¹⁴ but literary criticism changed with Barthes’s emphasis on the reader as the locus of interpretation. With the deposing of the author as preeminent genius, the text was no longer seen as unprecedented, but as part of an open-ended dialogue, a confluence “made of multiple writings, drawn from many cultures.”¹⁵

Second, as in his earlier collection of cultural critiques published in his book *Mythologies*, Barthes continued to demythologize the assumed ‘universality’ of beliefs in “The Death Of The Author.” Opening up the narrow parameters of literary study to include the world at large allowed for a multiplicity of credible voices. Finally, the general, anti-theological,¹⁶ revolutionary tone of “The Death of the Author” upset the sacrosanct status of literature. Barthes is remembered among those who revealed the hidden hierarchies that established works as canonical, thereby opening up the field of literature to include formerly marginalized voices.

Feminist critics such as Toril Moi saw the death of the author as emancipatory, freeing writers from the “patriarchal practice of *authority*”¹⁷ that had formerly excluded marginalized groups from acceptance. Others, like Nancy K. Miller, held a more mitigated view. Though recognizing the benefits gained by the death of the author as an authority “who excludes the less-known works of women and minority writers from the canon,”¹⁸ Miller worried that the “postmodernist decision that the Author is dead, and subjective agency along with him, does not necessarily work for women and prematurely forecloses the question of identity for them.”¹⁹ More specifically, Miller was concerned about “the asymmetrical demands generated by different writing identities, male and female, or, perhaps more usefully, canonical or hegemonic, and noncanonical or marginal.”²⁰ Her sentence structure implies a false dichotomy: male, canonical, and hegemonic are necessarily contrasted with female, noncanonical, and marginal by her description. Nevertheless, her concerns typify the disquiet of those marginalized voices that felt that their biographies, their life histories, their origins, represented “asymmetrical” exigencies that were an intrinsic part of what they were as artists and writers. Barthes’s overstated, revolutionary claims that “writing is the destruction of every voice”²¹ or, “writing is that [...] oblique space where our subject slips away, the negative where all identity is lost, starting with the very identity of the body writing,”²² seem to come from a privileged position, given that many marginalized voices have faced difficult physical circumstances such as poverty, violence, and dislocation. This seeming erasure of the body writing stands in contrast to Virginia Woolf’s assertion in *A Room of One’s Own*, first presented as a series of lectures in 1928 a mere decade after British women received the right to vote, that “these webs” – stories, plays, poems, essays – “are not spun in mid-air by incorporeal creatures, but are the work of suffering human beings, and are attached to grossly material things, like health and money and the houses we live in.”²³ It is important to note that Barthes’s disconnect

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between a text and the visceral struggles of artists and writers comes from a privileged position that has since been contested.

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Given Barthes's insistence on the incorporeal and impersonal nature of both the writer and reader in "The Death of the Author," it may seem ironic that several of Barthes's major works in the following decade dwelt around notions of subjectivity. Yet one may consider this a continued exploration of his earlier intellectual assertions. For instance, Barthes severs himself from his autobiographical project, *Roland Barthes*, by the insertion of a handwritten epigraph on the preface page, which reads: "It must all be considered as if spoken by a character in a novel."²⁴ This gap between self and text corresponds to the assertion in "The Death of the Author" that "the modern scriptor is born simultaneously with the text, is in no way equipped with a being preceding or exceeding the writing."²⁵ Likewise, his fragmented presentation of seemingly unrelated entries in this 'autobiography' mirrors his perception of the subject as fluid and transient, a point of view strongly marked by existentialism, defined by John Sturrock as "the presumed unity of any individual is dissolved into a plurality."²⁶ Equally suggestive of self-division, Barthes refers to himself in various grammatical persons, and often switches points of view throughout the text. In one such instance, the section subtitled "*Emploi du temps* – Schedule," after listing the mundane minutiae of his life, Barthes admonishes himself in the second person: "All of which has no interest. Further, not only do you indicate your class allegiances, but you even make of such an indication a literary confession."²⁷ Barthes's fluid movement between first, second and third person consistently reminds the reader that he has created an autobiographical persona, a literary contrivance. And yet the last words of this section, his reference to the "futility" of this autobiographical impulse and his self-critical musing: "you constitute yourself, in fantasy, as a "writer," or worse still: *you constitute yourself*,"²⁸ convey a sense of self-disgust at this literary desire to create himself as a character. For the stories we tell ourselves, the stories by which we make meaning in our lives, are always selective, always reductive and simultaneously additive. We ignore certain indications that would interfere with our self-perception, while valorizing other aspects of our existence that would confirm it. Our autobiographies are essentially mythologies.

Barthes returns more than once to the inadequacy of language to express certain experiences, especially emotions, and specifically love. In another section, he imagines a discourse between two lovers as "an unheard-of speech in which in which the sign's form is repeated but never

is signified.”²⁹ For Barthes, this complete indeterminacy is liberative as “the speaker and the lover finally triumph over the dreadful *reduction* which language (and psychoanalytic science) transmit to all our affects.”³⁰ Language’s ability to permutate into a multiplicity of meanings is antiauthoritarian, and therefore subversive, in the most revolutionary sense of the word. Barthes is comfortable with this open-endedness of meaning and even to the point of resisting interpretation,³¹ as is the case with love itself. He says of his “disjointed” texts that “no one of [them] caps any other; the latter is nothing but a *further* text, the last of the series, not the ultimate in meaning: *text upon text*, which never illuminates anything.”³² While Barthes seems resigned to the limitations of language in his autobiographical venture, and even celebrates the profusion of meanings inherent in a text of one’s life, the death of his mother two years after the publication of *Roland Barthes* provoked a serious depression that caused him to question his life, his work, and the nature of existence. Barthes never knew his father, who died in the First World War while he was an infant. Barthes’s mother raised him: he lived with her his entire life, and nursed her in her final days.

It was during her illness that he began work on *Camera Lucida*, a book about photography. “Part Two” deals almost exclusively with photographs of his mother, as he searches through old photographs to “‘find’ her,” as he puts it, “straining toward the essence of her identity.”³³ As previously mentioned, Sturrock points out that Barthes’s conception of the self as indeterminate and changing is existentialist; yet *Camera Lucida* betrays an opposing philosophy, that of essentialism. Sturrock writes: “Essentialism holds that within each human individual there is some ultimate essence which does not change.”³⁴ Born out of grief, Barthes’s search for something enduring of his mother’s essence is *logically* inconsistent with his notion of the ephemeral self. When he discovers the *Winter Garden Photograph*, a picture of his mother as a five-year-old child, he declares, “I saw the kindness which had formed her being immediately and forever.”³⁵ ‘Forever’ expresses the idea of an unchanging, essential being, which he later affirms when he writes, “the *Winter Garden Photograph* was indeed essential, it achieved for me [...] *the impossible science of the unique being*.”³⁶ There is no logic to how this photograph affects Barthes: it is not even reproduced in the text because its effect cannot be duplicated. “It exists only for me.”³⁷

While *Camera Lucida* is a critique of photography, it shifts to near-poetic form when Barthes tries to identify how a photograph communicates. He settles on the term “air,” recognizing its inadequacy: “I use this word, lacking anything better, for the expression of truth.”³⁸ As he struggles to

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describe his personal “*satori*,” or epiphany, “in which words fail,”³⁹ Barthes adopts the language of metaphor, and captures something of the indefinable quality of photography:

*Thus the air is the luminous shadow which accompanies the body; and if the photograph fails to show this air, then the body moves without a shadow, and once this body is severed [...] there remains no more than a sterile body. It is by this tenuous umbilical cord that the photographer gives life; if he cannot, either by lack of talent or bad luck, supply the transparent soul its bright shadow, the subject dies forever.*⁴⁰

Faced with his grief and loss, Barthes further resorts to language with religious overtones, a vocabulary that attempts to fathom the indefinable. In his *Mourning Diary: October 26, 1977 – September 15, 1979*, written after his mother’s death, Barthes is elegiac. He regrets the unbelieving age in which he lives, which disallows spiritual consolation. He muses: “Seeing the swallows flying through the summer evening air, I tell myself, thinking painfully of *maman*: how barbarous not to believe in souls – in the immortality of souls! The idiotic truth of materialism!”⁴¹

As this diary entry suggests, Barthes fell into a depression after his mother’s death that caused him to question his life, his work, his existence. As J. Gerald Kennedy notes in “Roland Barthes, Autobiography, and the End of Writing,” his mother’s death “brought about radical changes in the way Barthes thought about the nature of the self and the purpose of writing”⁴². Examining his own notes from Barthes’s last series of lectures, Kennedy records that in one seminar, Barthes expressed a sense of failure, believing “that his previous writing amounted to a betrayal of his true concerns.”⁴³ Such an admission suggests that Barthes had been reassessing his values. He even “expressed the desire to ‘escape from the prison house of critical meta-language,’”⁴⁴ which suggests dissatisfaction with his work, but also corresponds with a confession in the opening pages of *Camera Lucida*: “I had always suffered from: the uneasiness of being a subject torn between two languages, one expressive, the other critical.”⁴⁵

As demonstrated, Barthes’s exploration into the nature of photography in *Camera Lucida*, especially his attempt to define the fugitive, ranges into lyrical imagery. Barthes’s struggles to define the elusive quality of a photographic image and the incompleteness and indeterminacy of his efforts

are what make his ruminations interesting. As art critic Martin Herbert, referring to *Camera Lucida*, says, “I don’t go looking for ‘ideas about photography’ in that book; I read it for a certain kind of vulnerability.”⁴⁶ Brian Dillon highlights the direct influence that this book had on artists including “Gerhard Richter, Christian Boltanski, Tacita Dean and Fiona Tan [who] have all amassed archives of everyday portraits.”⁴⁷ Its influence can perhaps be attributed to the text’s metaphorical language, a means of expression that resists definitive interpretations. Thus the book continues to offer new insights for the reader with each reading.

Through his personal journey of grief, Barthes decided that he must write a novel, his *vita nota*,⁴⁸ in which his mother would feature as a main character. This novel was never written, though the preparation of the novel served as a basis for his last series of lectures.⁴⁹ His inability to complete this account before his death in February 1980 suggests that, in his internal struggle between critical and creative writing, Barthes could not shut down his critical mind long enough to give complete expression to fiction. Or perhaps, as with *Camera Lucida*, his exploratory analyses merged genres.

It is interesting to note how in the proliferation of meanings, writing and criticism that “The Death of the Author” engendered became a kind of self-fulfilling confirmation for Barthes’ theory of the author disappearing into the instance of writing. As demonstrated, Barthes’s writing life departed from this earlier work, as he continued to explore notions of subjectivity and even, with his mother’s death, apparently embrace more essentialist views of the human entity. As Virginia Woolf sensed in the 1920s, the ‘body writing,’ the personal life trajectories of artists and writers are complex and nuanced, and even marked by self-contradiction.

This, in fact, is one of the problems of the biographical/ auto-biographical impulse. Life stories must always be reductive, due to the inherent limitations of language and our own unconscious predilection to draw upon prevailing mythologies. For Barthes, it was much more satisfying to explore the multiplicity of meanings that comprise a life than to be reduced to the autobiographical persona inscribed in Curriculum vitae, newsy human interest stories or in any number of famous persons’ ghost-written memoirs. Through his works, Barthes subjected our unquestioned beliefs to closer scrutiny and opened the way for artists and writers to take a similar approach in their own work.

Endnotes

- 1 John Lichfield’s makes an excellent summary of the timeline of the Paris riots of May 1968 and their historical

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- significance. Writing in 2008, some forty years later, Lichfield points out the exceptional quality of these events. While there have been student rebellions before and since Lichfield argues, “In no other country did a student rebellion almost bring down a government. In no other country did a student rebellion lead to a workers’ revolt.” John Lichfield, “Égalité! Liberté! Sexualité!: Paris, May 1968,” *The Independent*, February 23, 2008. Accessed Jan. 28, 2015.
- 2 Clara Claiborne Park, “Author! Author! Reconstructing Roland Barthes,” *The Hudson Review* 43, No. 3 (1990: Autumn): 377.
- 3 Ibid.
- 4 Roland Barthes, “The Death of the Author,” *Image, Music, Text*, Translated by Stephen Heath (New York: Hill and Wang, 1977), 147. Barthes’ parentheses.
- 5 Ibid.
- 6 The offshoot of seeing the world as a text to be read and interpreted encouraged critical analysis of previously unexamined assumptions which opened the way for cultural studies as a discipline.
- 7 Ibid.
- 8 Ibid.
- 9 Claiborne Park, “Reconstructing Roland Barthes,” 380.
- 10 Ibid.
- 11 Barthes, “The Death of the Author,” 148.
- 12 Ibid., 146.
- 13 Not however, a reader as a person, for this reader is a “space” which is “without history, biography, psychology;” an abstract entity. See Barthes, “The Death of the Author,” 148.
- 14 Ibid., 146.
- 15 Ibid., 148.
- 16 Ibid., 147.
- 17 Toril Moi, as quoted in Cheryl Walker, “Feminist Literary Criticism and the Author,” *Critical Inquiry*, 16: 3, 1990: 553.
- 18 Nancy Miller, quoted in Walker, “Feminist Literary Criticism and the Author,” 556.
- 19 Ibid.
- 20 Ibid., 557.
- 21 Barthes, “The Death of the Author,” 142.
- 22 Ibid.
- 23 Virginia Woolf, *A Room of One’s Own* (London: The Hogarth Press, Ltd., 1949), 63.
- 24 Roland Barthes, *Roland Barthes*, Translated by Richard Howard (New York: Hill and Wang, 1977), no pagination. The epigraph also appears on p. 119.
- 25 Barthes, “The Death of the Author,” 145.

- 26 John Sturrock, cited by J. Gerald Kennedy, "Roland Barthes, Autobiography, and the End of Writing," *The Georgia Review* 35, No. 2 (1981: Summer): 390.
- 27 Barthes, *Roland Barthes*, 82.
- 28 Ibid. Barthes' emphasis.
- 29 Barthes, *Roland Barthes*, 114.
- 30 Ibid.
- 31 Even in *Mythologies*, written in the 1950s, Barthes sought to deconstruct the 'givens', the hitherto unexamined meaning underlying ordinary cultural activities. Using the example of a magazine cover illustrating a young African boy in military uniform saluting the French flag, Barthes notes that this photograph is "A kind of *arrest* [...]the Negro suddenly hails me in the name of French imperiality; but at the same moment the Negro's salute thickens, becomes vitrified, freezes into an eternal reference meant to *establish* French imperiality. On the surface of language something has stopped moving." 125 (Barthes' italics) Barthes resisted this authoritative use of language that for him, typified imperialism and authoritarianism. Roland Barthes, *Mythologies*, translated by Annette Lavers, Hill and Wang, New York, 1972.
- 32 Barthes, *Roland Barthes*, 120. Barthes' emphasis.
- 33 Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography*, Translated by Richard Howard (Hill and Wang, New York, 1981), 66.
- 34 Sturrock, as cited in Kennedy, "Roland Barthes, Autobiography, and the End of Writing," 389-390. Barthes' refusal to assign a hierarchy of meaning to the diffuse texts of *Roland Barthes* and his emphasis on the futility of trying to construct an autobiographical character further support Sturrock's assertion.
- 35 Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, 69.
- 36 Ibid., 71. Barthes' italics.
- 37 Ibid., 73.
- 38 Ibid., 109.
- 39 Ibid.
- 40 Ibid., 110.
- 41 Roland Barthes, *Mourning Diary: October 26, 1977 – September 15, 1979*, Translated by Richard Howard (Hill and Wang, New York, 2010), 159.
- 42 Kennedy, "Roland Barthes, Autobiography, and the End of Writing," 381.
- 43 Ibid., 383.
- 44 Ibid.
- 45 Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, 8.
- 46 Quoted in Brian Dillon, "Rereading *Camera Lucida* by Roland Barthes," The

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- Guardian, March 26, 2011. <http://www.theguardian.com/books/2011/mar/26/roland-barthes-camera-lucida-rereading>. Accessed Jan. 30, 2015.
- 47 Ibid.
- 48 Barthes, *Mourning Diary*, 74. The term references Dante's monument to grief, *The Divine Comedy*.
- 49 Published as *The Preparation of the Novel: Lecture Courses and Seminars at the Collège de France, 1978-1979 and 1979-1980*, translated by Kate Briggs, (Columbia UP, New York, 2011).

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- . "The Death of the Author." In *Image, Music, Text*. Translated by Stephen Heath, 142-148. New York: Hill and Wang, 1977.
- . *Mourning Diary: October 26, 1977 - September 15, 1979*. Translated by Richard Howard. New York: Hill and Wang, 2009.
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