Review: Death and Return of the Author
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Death and Return of the Author


IN THIS FORMIDABLE BOOK, Seán Burke exposes the illogicalities, contradictions and incoherence in recently fashionable attacks on the concept of the author. Wryly noting in a Prologue how the post-mortem revelations of Paul de Man's collaborationist past attracted renewed attention to the rigorous separation between writers and their texts which that critic had strongly advocated, he then goes on in his Introduction to declare the literary lineage for ideas of the death of the author – in Mallarmé, Valéry, Proust etc. – 'palpably false', and traces them instead to the moment in France during the 1950s when a dominant Phenomenology was challenged by structural linguistics. In the three chapters which follow, he investigates the conceptual difficulties Barthes, Foucault and Derrida face as they seek to disrupt traditional notions of the relation between a text and the person who wrote it.

Burke shows that the 'Author' whose death Barthes declared in his famous essay of 1967 was an Aunt Sally (or its pc equivalent). Once he had cleared the air of this figure made falsely, or at least anachronistically analogous to God in his omnipotence, Barthes was free to give way in a variety of different ways to what proved to be a fascination with the connections between life and work. In elaborations of the old Wildean paradox about life imitating art, one of these ways involved seeing the author as not the origin of his text but created both in and by it. Another honourable victim of Barthes' seductive charm, Burke recuperates the original essay by seeing it as not really directed against authorship as such but rather an 'instrumentalist conception of language'. He points out that once in S/Z 'Sarrasine' has been transformed into a non-realist text, Barthes has no further reason not to associate Balzac with it since, 'When a text no longer speaks the language of representation, the death of the author becomes gratuitous'.
Barthes is the least philosophical of Burke’s three subjects and the one least likely, therefore, to be ill at ease in self-contradiction. In the chapter on Foucault the emphasis falls on *The Order of Things* and its ambitious history of Western culture. Burke insists on the difficulties which arise from Foucault’s determination to avoid evolutionary or dialectical models and see the ‘epistemes’, which at a deep ‘archaeological’ level govern all discourse in the three periods into which he divides the culture of Europe after the Middle Ages, as entirely independent of each other. He shows how anxiety to deny the influence of Descartes on the third period, which for Foucault begins in 1800 and is characterised by the adoption of man as subject/object of all knowledge, leads to ‘a reading of the Cartesian *cogito* utterly at variance with its construction in the *Meditations*’. For Burke, this is less damaging than one might think, partly because he is half-attracted to Harold Bloom’s notion of those ‘strong readings’ – readings wilfully false or at least highly idiosyncratic – of powerful predecessors who might otherwise condemn one to silence. (There is an occasional hint in this book that if Burke had not such a healthy respect for accuracy he might have been tempted to read his three figures in this way also.)

A more serious result of Foucault’s schemata is the logical inconsequence of his celebration of Nietzsche as the one thinker of the third period who could anticipate and announce its imminent end. As Burke puts it in a passage fairly representative of the way this book is written,

Foucault nowhere considers why Nietzsche should be archaeologically unconstrainable . . . In one breath, he presents discourse as entirely subject to the rule, as thoroughly determined, constituted and circumscribed by the epistemic conditions of its emergence; in another, he wishes to sponsor, endorse and liberate a revolutionary or transgressive literature, a thought which defies any repressive systems, which would break free of any categories, even those which archaeology has imposed upon discourse.

There are objections here to post-structuralist thinking which are very familiar and reoccur in different forms throughout Burke’s book. In the chapter on Barthes, for example, he has already pointed to the peculiarity of celebrating Mallarmé as the author of the Author’s disappearance; and a few pages after this quotation he will describe Lacan as ‘surely implicated in the *folie circulaire of authoring and authorising* the disappearance of the subject, of *declaring* that no-one speaks’. Here the problem is how Nietzsche can so transcend the conditions which allow him to write and think that he is able to predict what will take their place. In Burke’s implied view, Nietzsche functions here as Foucault’s *alter ego* since for
The Order of Things not to be just one more ‘monument to the anthropological era, to the discourse on man, his destiny and ends’, its author needs to adopt a ‘point of view of ideal exteriority’. His must be ‘the discourse of all discourses, the one site from which the rules of formation of four centuries of writing can be revealed’. The transcendence which Foucault bestows on Nietzsche is, therefore, his own but, as Burke points out, he can only identify with Nietzsche to this extent by misreading what he wrote almost as drastically as he mis-reads Descartes’s Meditations. This is demonstrated in a number of quotations from Nietzsche whose power and straightforwardness compare very favourably with most of the other material cited in this book. In one famous passage, from the Genealogy of Morals, Nietzsche complains of philosophers who aspire to impersonality when ‘what happens at bottom is that a prejudice, a notion, an “inspiration”, generally a desire of the heart sifted and made abstract, is defended by them with reasons sought after the event – they are one and all advocates who do not want to be regarded as such, and for the most part no better than cunning pleaders for their prejudices which they baptise “truths”’. This is an uncomfortable charge for anyone in search of an ‘ideal exteriority’.

The chapter on Derrida is much the most difficult. This is not because Burke fails to make clear what Derrida appears to be saying; and still less because there is any confusion about his own position. But what, many readers are likely to wonder, does it really mean to say, ‘Where Derrida’s thought here goes beyond Heidegger is in asserting that the metaphysical determination of being as presence could only have been produced as the outcome of the repression of writing, and that logocentrism is, therefore, the prior condition of onto-theology, the latter being produced as an effect of the valorisation of the logos or fully-present meaning’? This statement is perfectly clear as long as the reader remains in the upper atmosphere and does not begin to ponder all that might be implied by its major abstractions. Since language is the central concern of Burke’s three figures, and therefore of Burke himself, it sometimes seems a pity that he makes so little use of the later Wittgenstein, who at least gives the impression of working from the bottom up, and of posing problems of understanding which are more fruitful. But another way of expressing this reservation, less flattering to readers and reviewers, is to say that the statement above is only really meaningful, can only (that is) be properly estimated, when whoever reads it is thoroughly conversant, not only with Heidegger but with Kant, Hegel and Husserl also (to name but four).

Burke notes that the documentary evidence which Derrida, in a history of Western culture even more ambitious than Foucault’s, can offer for
his belief that 'Logocentrism is not itself part of the metaphysics of presence, the metaphysics of presence is the effect of logocentrism', is extraordinarily exiguous. He does not believe that a hundred pages are devoted to Rousseau's *Essay on the Origin of Languages* in *Of Grammatology* because it is just one example of the many which might have been chosen; and he exposes the ambiguity of Derrida's claims to have none of the traditional interests in that work's authorship. As he points out, the impressive demonstration in those hundred pages that the *Essay* finally says the opposite of what Rousseau meant it to say necessarily reinstates the old idea of authorial intention. He notes in passing that a recent attempt by Knapp and Michaels to argue for 'intention' by seeing it as entirely isomorphic with a text's meaning makes the concept as irrelevant to literary analysis as it was for Wimsatt and Beardsley. For Derrida, however, it has to matter, if only because, 'As a general principle, preparatory labours of construction must accompany any deconstructive act'. Derrida's reading of Rousseau is thus yet one more proof of the claim Burke makes at the end of his Prologue: 'the concept of the author is never more alive than when pronounced dead'.

Described but not quoted from, this book might be assumed to give considerable comfort to literary conservatives. On the back cover Alastair Fowler calls it a ‘magisterial study (that) demolishes the structuralist and deconstructive positions on authorship’. Those positions are very effectively attacked by Burke who has an impressive degree of intellectual stamina, reasons very closely and is obviously well-informed. Yet he writes so much within the idiom of those he is criticising that the hardest of his knocks is also a pat on the back. One of the ironies he uncovers is that the three writers who have done more than any others to discredit the idea of authorship have themselves been the objects of ‘the most flagrant abuses of auteurism in recent times’ in a secondary literature ‘for the most part given over to scrupulously faithful and almost timorous reconstitutions of their thought’. He himself is not timid, and quite willing to take Barthes, Foucault and Derrida on, but in a language so much their own, or rather – in the English context – so redolent of what is called in British universities ‘continental’ (rather than analytic) philosophy, and of transliterated French, that if the effect cannot always be described as complimentary neither is it one of ‘demolition’.

This has very considerable advantages, some of which are apparent in this paragraph from Burke's concluding, summarising chapter:

In many respects it matters little what species of determinism is used to argue the death of the author. Whether we see the subject as constituted in and through language, history or *episteme*, the
postulation of a prior constitutive cause does not deny the constituted entity its existence, nor does it prevent the entity in turn causing something else. Joyce is not the father of the *logos*, but this does not mean that in *Finnegans Wake*, he did not reconfigure language in a textual construct without precedent in the history of writing. Naturally, we must agree with Barthes, Lacan and others, that no subjectivity precedes a language that has evolved for millennia before the subject utters its first inchoate words, but this in no way impedes the ability of an author to work – like the logothete – innovatively with and within language.

A golden rule for anyone contemplating a career in literary studies these days is that the middle way butters no parsnips. Burke himself makes clear how much of the enormous success of his three writers has had to do with a certain critical absolutism, their willingness to adopt extreme positions which confer a sense of power and can be taken over without the distracting qualifications that often followed them. (To construct one’s own history of culture might after all take some time.) If someone writing in a different idiom from Burke’s had said that, although whatever authors can do may be largely determined, they nevertheless enjoy a certain degree of autonomy, he would risk being sneered at as some feeble representative of an antiquated common-sense. The way Burke makes the point gives it a chance of being heard in the right quarters and, although what he says seems to me to give the power of working ‘innovatively with and within language’ to the likes of George Eliot as well as Joyce, he knows the right direction in which to look for his illustration.

But this insider status also raises awkward questions, one of which is why Burke’s sharp eye should be so narrowly confined to the single issue of authorship. That he is more sympathetic to Barthes than his other two subjects increases the appeal of his book for those whose interest is in literature rather than philosophy; but in deciding that the real enemy of that writer is not authorship per se but the aesthetics of representation he gives an account of the latter as simplified and parodic as Barthes’s own concept of ‘the Author’. He says that in one of his best books Barthes denies ‘representational significance’ to the discourses of his three subjects so that we get ‘Sade without evil, Fourier without socialism, Loyola without God’. Even given that ‘representational significance’ cannot reasonably be reduced to three nouns in this way and that one of these nouns is any case seriously out of kilter with the other two, the reader might still feel that there are problems in the philosophy of language here at least as knotty as those involved in authorship and wonder why Burke ignores them. One of the methods he employs very effectively is to
paraphrase his subjects' pronouncements about authorship in a way which makes any comment from him on their fallaciousness otiose. This training in scepticism tends to occur at the beginning of each chapter and is very hard to forget when the paraphrases become as neutral or respectful as the account (in the Barthes chapter) of how Julia Kristeva, 'adapting Lacanian insight to Bakhtin's distinction between monologic and polyphonic literature', derives the two orders of linguistic signification, the semiotic and symbolic, from each individual's negotiation of the Oedipal phase. What absurdities (one might think) could a mind as sharp as Séan Burke's not find elsewhere than in the issue of authorship if he chose to look; but how far could he afford to look without betraying the group affiliation his language everywhere declares?

Although it may have been ever thus, the choice of critical idiom seems even more important than it used to be now the literary world is divided into two camps which do not, and increasingly cannot communicate with each other. People within that world will find this description objectionable when they think of all that separates them from those with whom they might be classed; but a social psychologist would have little difficulty in establishing a broad division. One can easily imagine items of the questionnaire: 'Would you hesitate (a) not at all (b) quite some time or (c) interminably before using any of the following: eidetic, implex, dehiscence, coronate (for crown), noetic appurtenances, invagination, adequate (as a verb), consectaneous, sonance, logothete etc.? (Not that the issue is really a question of single words any more than it is for Sade, Fourier, Loyola). For Burke's choice of idiom it might be said that it has Youth on its side (as anyone in touch with graduate studies in English will testify); that it is inter-disciplinary and sophisticated in ways what it seeks to replace was not; that no-one could accuse it of being provincial; and that it deals (or at least appears to deal) with matters which are self-evidently of major importance. Readers of this Journal will have no difficulty in imagining what might be said on the other side. In Writing Degree Zero Barthes has some interesting things to say about the political implications of language choice even when its political effect seems infinitesimal or non-existent. As Burke's practice shows, it is a matter on which compromise is harder to achieve than on this or that ideological issue. This is partly because how to write is not something that is decided on the spot but is a consequence of habituation: of what (for example) people habitually read or have imposed on them by a curriculum. No-one, it seems to me, could write like Séan Burke who had only a passing knowledge of post-structuralism rather than a day-to-day familiarity, just as no-one would write like him who had enjoyed the last five years in the intimate company of what were once known as the classics of European literature.
This question of language is important because the remarkable success of post-structuralism in recent years has depended on manner as well as matter and clearly cannot be accounted for wholly by reference to the rightness or wrongness of certain ideas. To explain it fully, moreover, would require in this case a wholly serious contribution from the sociologists. Seán Burke suggests this when, in his last chapter, he describes the somewhat discreditable rapidity with which powerful figures at Yale turned their phenomenological coats after Derrida’s lecture on ‘Structure, Sign and Play’ at Johns Hopkins in 1966. According to him, the ‘alacrity and extremism’ of Hillis Miller’s ‘reversal of perspective’, for instance, brought with it intellectual errors which were the outcome of ‘espousing an anti-phenomenological poststructuralism without thinking properly through Husserlian phenomenology or structuralism’. If that is the case, not properly understanding what he was talking about does not seem to have done Hillis Miller much harm or made him any the less influential. Literary critics with a philosophical bent are not vulnerable to the same dangers of contradiction which attend the labours of scientists, and there are larger forces at work in their success than what used to be known as truth. One of the valuable services the post-structuralists have performed is to teach us too much about those forces to expect that individuals can exert a great deal of conscious control over events; but it is not an unfair extrapolation from the case Burke argues to imagine that they can exert some, and that the proficiency with which he clarifies the issue of authorship will therefore do some good. Good to himself is highly likely since he performs the circumscribed task he sets himself so well, but in these confused times for English teaching, and without a Nietzsche (or indeed a Foucault) to provide even the illusion of knowing what will come next, the extent or nature of any good in a more general sense is harder to predict. The only certainty is that whatever happens will have less to do with the outcome of current ideological debates than with, for example, the large-scale changes at present taking place in the schools.

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