

In Defense of the Author¹

Gohar Madoyan
Yerevan State University

“The author always manifests himself in his works regardless of his will”
(N.M. Karamzin)

The concept of the author is not a new one. It has arrested the minds of most thinkers from the ancient world to modern times. Aristotle in his *Poetics* and Plato in *Ion* attempted to shed light on the definitions of poetry and poet. Much later Hermeneutics was to interpret texts through the hermeneutical circle with special reference to the personality of the author. In fact, it was in the age of Romanticism that the self of the poet received more emphasis than ever. Poetry was generally viewed as a means of self-expression. English poets such as W. Wordsworth, P. Shelly and others considered their own art as the reflection of their own impressions, feelings and emotions. So, it was not least surprising that the poets of the time were more inclined towards lyrical poetry in belief that it could best serve as a tool to express one’s feelings.

However, the concept of the author became one of the leading issues of linguistics, literary studies and psychology in the second half of the 20th century when the ideas of individualism, respect for human rights and equality were advanced. The “self” became the dominant figure in all spheres of human activity and literature was by no means an exception. As a result, any piece of writing was viewed as a unique world, the result of the creative activity of the writer and a kind of dialogue between the author and the reader.

The developments in the world of politics at the start of the century brought about underlying changes. Literature was among the first to be affected. Romantic literature seemed to have exhausted itself in a sense that it no longer seemed to serve its aims. It was high time new approaches were adopted. The concept of the author was one of the key issues that received much speculation for it was absolutely essential for the further understanding of literature itself, in a way because the definition of literature of any kind first and foremost requires the straightforward answer to a most complicated question - “Who is speaking?”

It is not an easy task, though, when one comes to think of the dual character of the author. On the one hand, he is a physical being. This gives him a chance to abandon the work and go beyond it. Hence, the author becomes not only an aesthetic category, but also a social and cultural one. On the other hand, the author is a fictional character. Nevertheless, there comes a moment when the author’s individuality turns into a character and the type of the character it becomes largely depends on the very individuality of the physical author, as well as on a series of external factors – historical, cultural, social, etc.

Most researchers are inclined to call the first version a biographical author and the second – aesthetic author or image of the author. However, it is not a rare occurrence that in literary works “it is not the author himself who speaks, but rather the narrator or the lyrical hero. Then, who tells us what happens in the lives of the characters? In fact, who-

ever it is, the reader hears the voice of the author quite distinctly. Then, why can't we identify the author with the narrator? Such identification would not be quite right, narratologists claim, since the narrator is not the sole manifestation of the author's consciousness. The author does not manifest himself only in the process of telling, but in various parts – the plot, the structure, the organization of time and space (Orlova 2008:7): Otherwise stated, the author is everywhere and nowhere in the text, thus, he cannot be identified with any of the heroes. As it follows, the narrator is only one of the expressions of the author's consciousness and it gives the author a chance "to play".

Despite the diversity of ideas, the author continued to enjoy a certain superior position in relation to other characters. His role in the process of text interpretation was often decisive. However, his position started to dwindle with the introduction of Structuralism and later by post-structuralism. The 20th century saw a merciless criticism of the subject rejecting the existence of an independent and complete subject. Roland Barthes all alone revolutionized all the ideas voiced before with his essay - "The Death of the Author". That was a challenge to the traditional approaches. The author was no longer the leading character in the process of text interpretation. Moreover, he had nothing to do with the text. This was the key message that was very quickly supported by a group of followers. The essay "What is the author" by M. Foucault was yet another attack. "The writing subject erases the signs of his particular individuality" (Foucault 1996:14). In short, one may assume that it is not the author who speaks, but the language itself (Barthes 1989:385). Any writing is faceless. All the ideas of the voice fade away in the text. This is, in fact, a black and white labyrinth which "kills" any self-expression (Barthes 1994:384). Barthes believed that by excluding the author from the text, the text acquires additional meanings and it is read and perceived as there is no author at any level of it. The underlying approach of the Post-structuralism to this issue may be summed up as follows: by granting an author to the text, we put limits on it. The modern writer (scriptor) is born simultaneously with his text; he is in no way supplied with a being which precedes or transcends his writing, he is in no way the subject of which his book is the predicate; there is no other time than that of the utterance, and every text is eternally written here and now (Barthes 1989:387).

Still, others believed in the intended meaning of the text which was proposed by the author himself. Hence, the true interpretation could be possible "The object of interpretation in the humanities is the meaning intended by the author and the historical agents. The meaning is entrusted to meaningful forms that are the objectification of human thought" (Betti 1990:164). "Even if the text is interpreted as bearing different significance, the meaning is determinate in the sense intended by the author" (Hirsch 1967:250).

Speaking more broadly, the approaches held by linguists and literary critics may be generally classified into two main groups as to the concept of the author and his presence in the text – the one advocated by romantics (the author is central to any work, he is the human being who conveys his experience, emotions and feelings through his own works) and the complete absence of the author. Barthes and his supporters excluded the author not only as a personality, a living one who had a direct connection with his own work and

wished to use his work as a tool to show his attitude to the reality, but also the public figure, the bearer of certain historical and moral values. There is no author, so there is no point in searching for him between the lines.

If the lack of authorial interpretation of certain developments in a piece of writing does not lead to serious objections, the rejection of his being the heir of historical and social legacy causes much controversy. In a human speech one may always trace some social information indicating his social status and his attitude towards the ideas expressed. It may be satisfaction, indifference, admiration, etc. (Stepanov 1965:21). Indeed, regardless of the level of professionalism, creative talent, etc. one who is engaged in a creative activity of any kind is also a social being who exists or existed in a certain society at a certain period of time. And each society enjoys a specific mentality, world view and world perception that has been formed throughout long years and is affected by a number of factors - geopolitical, psychological, cultural, etc.). Each member of the society willy-nilly becomes the bearer of the system of values of the given society without even being conscious of the fact. The artists of any society or people engaged in creative endeavor are the ones who are distinguished as being oversensitive, keen observers. Traditionally, they have been held responsible for exposing the evils in the society, upbringing the youth in accordance with moral rules and for providing mental guidance for the nation.

This results in books which are directly connected with the political developments of the time and which carry the imprint of the author's psychology, national identity, culture and the past history. One wonders whether the great number of odes to the French Revolution and Napoleon and many other works would have ever been penned down had there not been the necessary historical grounds for them. Surely, the true work is the one that is able to arouse all kinds of feelings, and genius is the writer who manages to create a universal work with no time and space boundaries. The odes mentioned, though have not lost their aesthetic value, cannot arouse the same feelings among the ordinary French citizens as they did centuries ago. The stanzas that Byron wrote to honor Napoleon are considered from the perspective of the linguistic characteristics and literary style. However, one may wonder whether such works still serve their initial aim, i.e. to encourage wider sections of the society to engage in the movement, to instill faith and trust in the leader or in the aptness of the route taken.

If we manage to do away with the historical and social author, then what are we to do about the biographical one? How are we to treat him? In fact, biography is a certain period consisting of diverse events, feelings, emotions, facts and episodes, etc. It is not uncommon to see literary critics turn to biographical data to explain the works of great writers. The general belief of this approach is that the author puts down his own feelings and emotions since he cannot escape certain developments in his life and the positive and negative influences that they might entail. They are stored in the subconsciousness and may erupt like a volcano one day. In fact this method is quite efficient, because very often it does shed light on the work. The authorial intention becomes clearer when one considers the emotions he had while writing the work. Certainly, world literature is full of numerous writings which are open to interpretation and whose meaning seems inex-

haustible. It is really difficult to give them a single meaning and a single explanation. However, experience shows that it works with unidentified works i.e. pieces of literature which have not been identified as being written by a certain person. Isn't it due to the lack of sufficient biographical information about Shakespeare that we have not reached a clear interpretation of his works so far? Isn't it the reason why we are still in search of the dark lady of his sonnets.

Any field of human activity and interest is related to biography and it may be assumed that biography is the key to all of them, and the human life and human identity form the basis of it (Johnston 1927:xv). It goes without saying that trying to explain any work in terms of biography we run the risk of imposing one meaning to the literary text, thus depriving the reader of the opportunity of making his own judgments and interpretations. The text acquires one definite meaning which is surely not in the best interests of the text. It ought to be open to interpretations. That is the key characteristic that sets a literary text apart from a pile of works. This was the idea advocated by the very structuralists when they announced that the author is dead, thus, giving absolute freedom to the reader.

It is quite all right if we treat the issue from the point of view of the reader. However, things are different if we are to consider the issue from the part of the author. It should be noted that by saying biography we do not mean documentary evidence. The emphasis is placed on the emotional state and the inner world of the author in strong conviction that the works are the reflection of his soul. In fact, by denying the role of biographical evidence in the process of text interpretation we cast doubt on thousands of studies that aimed to decipher the hidden meaning of the works of various authors.

Obviously, postmodernism and deconstructionism have done everything to exclude the unwelcome figure of the author getting rid of him as of a real person. Authorial intention meets the same fate. "The hand is detached from any voice" claims Barthes. And it sounds quite all right until one comes to think of the *arm* of the author the hand depends on.

Excluding the author from the work Roland Barthes gave birth to the reader "the birth of the reader must be ransomed by the death of the Author". However, the birth of the reader implies resurrection of the author since every time the text is read the author is reborn. The author never dies; the reader, in a sense, nourishes the author by the very act of reading his text. And each different interpretation comes to the concept of the author; each time we offer a new interpretation of the text we confirm once again: The author never dies.

Note:

1. The title makes reference to an essay by E.R. Hirsch.

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Ի պաշտպանություն հեղինակի

«Հեղինակ» հայեցակերպի շուրջ բանավեճերը ծավալվում են գրականության ձևավորման վաղ շրջաններից մինչ օրս: Հեղինակին անդրադարձել են դեռևս անտիկ շրջանում և «գահադրել» ռոմանտիզմի դարաշրջանում: Այնուամենայնիվ, 20-րդ դարում անհատի պաշտամունքի, մարդու իրավունքների ու հավասարության գովերգմանը զուգահեռ ի հայտ եկան նոր փիլիսոփայական ուղղություններ, որոնք հարցականի տակ դրեցին մինչ այդ ընդունված ավանդական մոտեցումները: Ստրուկտուրալիստները և այնուհետև պոստստրուկտուրալիստները «սպանեցին» հեղինակին շունչ տալով ընթերցողին: Բայց արդյո՞ք հեղինակը մահացել է: Գուցե նա պարզապես ննջում է: