

AFTER THE EXPULSION OF THE AUTHOR:
BAKHTIN AS AN ANSWER TO POSTSTRUCTURALISM

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1. *Diagnosis*

Until the end of the nineteenth century the sole subject of literary scholarship was the author of the literary text. However, in the course of the twentieth century, the author seems to have been deprived not only of his privileges but, from the point of view of research, of the very right to exist. This process began with the Formalists' departure from so-called biographism in literary scholarship. The Formalists referred to the author only in terms of his function as the producer of the text, his skills, and his discursive techniques. The author's personal and biographical background was considered only to the extent that it determined his skills, i.e. it was taken into account only as part of the conditions of his life.¹

Later, in Structuralist theory, authorship was divided into the 'image of the author' and the 'abstract author'.² Both the image of the author (as the upper layer of fictionalized event-material) and the abstract author (as the implied source of composition and meaning), were deprived not only of their personal and biographical background, but even of the operative fictionalizing and aestheticizing activities which Formalism continued to ascribe to authorship. Since such activities logically precede the text itself, they were deemed no longer relevant to the immanent investigation of the literary text.

Finally, Poststructuralism renounced even the 'abstract author', whose defining function in externally and internally differentiating the work of art was assigned to the author-image located within the text itself. Such a conclusion follows from Boris Groys's account of Bakhtinian 'carnival imagery',³ and from Paul de Man's interpretations of Rilke and Rousseau in his collection *Allegories of Reading*.⁴ Both scholars maintained that the author has no privileged or predetermined position outside the text, and that, instead of controlling the text, the author is under its control.

Poststructuralist theorists simply refuted the second function left to the author by the Structuralists, i.e. that of giving identity and unity to the text. Believing such an author to be despotic and centralizing, and suspecting him of the imposition of a specific ideology, poststructuralists repudiated the notion that the author could personify the unity of a work of art. Their intention in so doing was to unfetter the text, and to liberate all meanings that were not subject to the control of the author alone. Since then investigation into the author of the literary text has not progressed at all. In recent years little has been written about the author. It would seem that, having successfully freed ourselves from the author's guardianship, we have delivered the work of art into our own hands, into the hands of the reader and the literary scholar.

In what follows I will refrain from posing those questions which persist even after almost a century has passed since the expulsion of the author from the position previously allocated to him. Instead I will investigate the development of literary scholarship into the motivation and hidden goals of authorship. Why is there no longer any need for the author and his authority? Why did scholarship want so urgently to be rid of him? What are the consequences of this deprivation of authorial power? This investigation will follow the above-mentioned three stages in the expulsion of the author: Formalism, Structuralism, and Poststructuralism.

A. Formalism

In their orientation toward the productive side of aesthetics the Formalists seemed to emphasize the importance of the author. But in their rejection of all the non-productive aspects of the author they may have impoverished the work of art. The point here is not the individual biography of the author-person as it casually 'flows into' the content of the text, but rather that the text needs the author's personality for different reasons. As a producer and as a craftsman, the author differentiates himself from the work of art he has created. In this role he is unable to identify himself with his text. As a consequence of creating a work of art, the author frees himself from the power of the meaning which has dominated him. This well-known psychological effect of artistic creation, which has, of course, nothing to do with the aesthetic specificity of art, is involuntarily stressed by every 'productive' aesthetic theory. 'The text is not me', says its producer, 'and that's how it should be'. Once the author has released himself, the reader shoulders the burden of the text and its meaning. This is the real purpose of the adoption of the 'devices' [*priemy*] which were so emphasized in Russian Formalism: the device *acts* upon the reader. What

does this mean? The text can only exist in the sphere of human thought. The text has no extra-human, purely textual existence. This is why the producer of the text is compelled to occupy the reader's mind with everything from which he wants to free himself. Only then can the author draw a boundary between himself and the text, i.e. fictionalize the text. The author becomes a disinterested spectator, while the reader becomes either his accomplice or his victim.

All this can be achieved by the author only at the cost of the aesthetic function of the artistic text. The author denies his responsibility for the architectonics of the text, i.e. for its *human form* in the sphere of human thought.⁵ It is impossible to produce a work of art according to a recipe, not because devices must always be employed in new functions in order to violate established norms, but because the author must answer with his personality for the whole potential meaning of the work of art. Without this answerability there can be no architectonic; there is only a complex formation with a predetermined potential to act upon a passive and submissive mind.

From the point of view of the aesthetic function, however, it may seem strange to demand that the author must not draw a line between himself and the text. For is it not the case that the text itself must cut off all connection with the author, in order to gain autonomous aesthetic value? Yes and no. The word *personality* has a double meaning. The author should free the text from his casual, private personality, but not from his *human* personality, his *soul*. Without the human soul—and the author exists in a purely aesthetic sense *only* as soul—the work of art does not exist in the human sphere and does not relate to humankind at all. Thus the Formalists deprived the text of its soul with their device-orientated view of literature. They did so not out of recklessness, but with the intention of removing the burden of existential answerability for the structure of the text from the author in order to free him from the cultural function of authorship. This contributed to the industrialization of culture: art became exchangeable and reproducible. The exemplary personality of the author, the human centre of the work of art, was replaced by a calculable effect on the consumer, and the history of literature was not only interpreted as, but was converted into, a chain of clients' alternating tastes. It is not mere coincidence that this first stage in the dethronement of the author ended in a subordination to politics. The author sold his soul in order to handle his devices freely and became, unawares, an 'engineer of the human soul'.

B. *Structuralism*

In literary scholarship, Structuralism's orientation towards linguistics entailed the grammatization of all aesthetic relations. In his essay 'The Death of the Author', Roland Barthes concisely describes this process: 'Linguistically, the author is never more than the instance writing, just as *I* is nothing more than the instance saying *I*. Language knows a "subject", not a "person", and this subject, empty outside of the very enunciation which denies it, suffices to make language "hold together", suffices, that is to say, to exhaust it.'⁶ Guided by linguistics, Structuralism operates with functions, not substances. As in modern physics, 'metaphysical' forces are replaced by formulae which express nothing but the mathematical equation in which they are formulated: gravity is transformed into a bend in space. In search of the role of the author in literature, the structuralist looks not for personality but for the equation of all conceptual entities. This equation he calls the *abstract author*. The term 'author' here is utterly arbitrary, since the relation of this term to the phenomenon of authorship is as formal as the relation of a mathematical formula to the phenomenon of nature that defines it. These formulae remain 'true' (i.e. free from contradiction), even if the 'phenomena' to which they 'refer' do not exist.

Structuralists nevertheless operate with the term 'abstract author' as though they were dealing with some sort of phenomenon, or as though the function still contained some authorial qualities.⁷ But structuralists cannot speak of authorship, i.e. of the content of this pure function, because a mathematical formula has no content. To do so would be to realize ontologically the very formula which results from the systematic self-limitation of immanent textual analysis. There would be no harm in this, since the scholar would simply have mistaken his investigation for Structuralism. Problems arise, however, when the phenomenologically empty formula of 'abstract authorship' is understood as the essence of the phenomenon of 'authorship', and when the essential (i.e. aesthetic) function of authorship is denuded by means of its mathematization. Is this what the structuralists achieved? According to Barthes and Foucault, this was precisely the goal of the redefinition of authorship.⁸ Both theorists approved of literary scholarship's departure from the authorship question, arguing that it was high time to get rid of the author, that usurper of the text, once and for all.

The text is thus deprived of its author, and the question of how it gains its relevance to the human world becomes unclear. If the systematic self-limitation of research to immanent textual phenomena becomes a

declaration of the text's real autonomy, then the text has no further need of either an author or a reader. A mathematical formula is true and self-sufficient even without a corresponding reality. A work of art cannot be self-sufficient in the same way. Not only does it express a relation, it also *is* something itself.

Understood as a sum of devices, the 'abstract author' is clearly not concerned with the aesthetic quality of a literary work of art. Consequently, it is not to the author that we address our legitimate demand that a work of art should have aesthetic quality. Nevertheless, such a demand must be made, and not only by the critic, but also by the literary scholar. The author is necessary as the addressee of aesthetic demands. The text's pretension to be a work of art can be rejected in principle only when this 'pretension' is connected with the human subject behind the text.

As we have already noted, the *main* demand made of the text concerns its relevance in the human world. Since art is a sensual phenomenon, such relevance can only be acquired through the activity of the senses. If such activity is not implied by the text, i.e. ascribed to the text's human subject, but is left only to the reader, then the work of art loses the organic unity to which Structuralism still clings. Such unity can be guaranteed by the author alone.

Finally, a model of the text in which the text is nothing but the organizational form of semiotic material does not correspond with the endless internal and external variation of the sensual world and of the empirical world. Such a model limits the meaning potential of verbal art to units which have exchange value in a marketplace of language signs.⁹ If meaning arises from the combination of signs, then the only proper access to it is via rational thought. Nevertheless, all that remains unsaid and unformed by rational thought must be drawn from the sensual richness of the human subject. With its model of the text as an autonomous field of signs Structuralism avoids involvement in this richness, and thereby constitutes itself as a rational science with the text as its object.

C. *Poststructuralism*

Poststructuralist scholars display a definite pattern of argumentation in their direct or indirect references to authorship. A hierarchical organization of the literary text with the author at the head is in fact implied in their proposal to dehierarchize the text. In unmasking the author's rhetoric they demonstrate the rhetorical aims of the literary text. In decentralizing the text they attest to an organization centred around the author's

position. Poststructuralists are aware of the ambiguity of their arguments, but they interpret such ambiguity as a necessary dialectic. What is the result of such a dialectic? It is striking that all three of these above-mentioned premises come from an ideological or even political sphere. There are of course texts which, beyond their aesthetic function, proselytize the reader in order to propagate a certain ideology. But it is the *aesthetics* of the literary text which concern literary scholarship. Poststructuralism is clearly not interested in the specificity of aesthetics. This is curious, in as much as it is precisely an aesthetic attitude towards the text which transforms a hierarchy of speech instances into dialogue, rhetoric into the beauty of speech, and a unified system of firm concepts into a human architectonic, into proportion in thought.

Where does such an evidently non-specific understanding of literary authorship come from? Poststructuralism denies the author's outsideness in relation to the text, arguing that authorship is necessarily entangled in the textual network. It is not the fictional world of the text which is questioned, but the real world beyond the text. Thus, the fictional world turns out to be the real world, and the real author turns out to be a fictional phenomenon. The image of the author *is* the author. There is no longer a difference between fiction and reality, since in producing texts we *create* the world in which we live. In consequence, any manipulation of the text becomes a manipulation of life, and hierarchies, rhetoric and centralization are no longer susceptible to a fictionalization process which would neutralize their manipulative potential. Neither can there be a unity of the text, for the image of the author is no longer in a position to control such a unity. Furthermore, strictly speaking, there can no longer be any understanding of the text; since the reader is also *inside* he cannot but identify the fictional world with his own private, contingent life. And finally, there can no longer be literary scholarship, for its object has vanished with the disappearance of the specific distinctiveness of aesthetics and art. Authors, readers, and literary scholars all participate in the game which intellectual life has become, where to take part means to desire victory, or control, over the text. It now becomes clear why, for Poststructuralism, hierarchy, rhetoric, and centralization are essential, because they indicate the goal of the game in which whoever plays more originally, commandingly, and convincingly will control minds.

For a poststructuralist the question of whether this is a correct or incorrect approach to literature is of course obsolete. Put another way, the question is whether or not we should join in the game; should we partici-

pate in the corresponding cultural development known as postmodernity? Does this postmodern point of view have any advantages to offer? Poststructuralists refer above all else to the unbinding of the text, and to the emancipation of meaning, which the autocratic author did not allow to develop. However, it is more likely that such 'emancipation' leads only to the death of meaning. In his book *Against Deconstruction* John Martin Ellis points out that the meaning of any given phrase will sooner be *impoverished* by an unrestricted quantity of possible meanings, than it will be enriched.¹⁰ Meaning arises from differentiation, and the broader the field of meaning, the *less* differentiation will be possible and the *less* will be the potential for meaning. We cannot acquiesce in such a reduction of meaning in the field of culture; if culture is a battlefield, then I stand on the 'other' side. I maintain the necessity of a centre around which meaning may crystallize. Such a centre can only be the author. But does not Poststructuralism argue that all centres are false because there is no such thing as authenticity, and that therefore an authentic centre is out of reach? At this point in the discussion we must turn to Bakhtin, who offers a way out of the postmodern dilemma through what he called answerability [*otvetstvennost*].

2. Prescription

In *Toward a Philosophy of the Act* Bakhtin appears to deny the possibility of extending the notion of answerability to the field of aesthetics. Art, for the early Bakhtin, is necessarily indifferent; beyond the unmediated seriousness of life itself. The moment a given situation becomes the object of aesthetic contemplation its challenging character is defused, and the category of answerability is no longer relevant. Such arguments illustrate the extent to which the young Bakhtin was influenced by Kierkegaard's antinomy between the aesthetic and the ethical.

However, this antinomy seems already to have been revoked in the last part of *Toward a Philosophy of the Act*, which contains an analysis of the world of aesthetic perception. The aesthetic intention not only turns out to be no longer axiologically neutral, but even serves as an illustration of the axiological structure of life. Here, as in the first chapter of the essay 'Author and Hero in Aesthetic Activity', Bakhtin presents aesthetic perception as the source of all value.

Such a re-evaluation of aesthetic intention may be explained by Bakhtin's realization that perception is essentially determined by perspec-

tive; it is perception so understood which is the medium in which answerability is primarily developed and embodied. In the light of answerability, point of view becomes the expression of a self-understanding perceptual perspective, compared with which all theoretically formulated imperatives are merely empty possibilities. Bakhtin discovered perceptual perspective as the primary form of answerability, preceding all material and formal ethics. Thus the axiological indifference of the aesthetic turns out to be a determination only of the thematic content of a text. Since perspective is a formal quantity, the axiological value of a text is expressed by its *form*, and the 'thematic' content is only what remains after axiological value has been discarded. It may seem strange that axiological value resides in the form and not the content of a work of art. Fictionalization has always been understood as an inhibition of 'relevance to life', whereas in fact it entails a shift of 'relevance to life' *back* into form, or rather, into the architectonics of perception, i.e. perspective. Art is a formal phenomenon due only to the architectonic of perception, the human axiological perspective.

The devices of perspectivization in a work of art therefore acquire aesthetic quality only thanks to their connection with answerability. Beyond this connection they are nothing but technical compositional elements, unable to generate meaning unless we use them as the material of our private associations. But why should we do this? Surely we would be bored by a *tabula rasa* of the imagination? If there is anything in the text which I do not already know, it must have an identity or a starting point beyond myself. We call this identity the aesthetic object. It cannot simply be inserted into a textual 'substance', since such a substance cannot be established phenomenologically. This has long been asserted in receptive aesthetic theory, whose arguments against aesthetic essentialism are entirely convincing. The identity of the aesthetic object can be determined only from the scale by which the work of art is governed, not only against a scale of private value, but also one of broader human perspective. The perspectival nature of aesthetic perception, which provides the foundation of all axiological value, also provides such a scale. The self-awareness implicit in such aesthetic perception and the awareness that it is determined by perspective demonstrates that contemplation is an activity for which I am answerable.

The correlation of perceptual perspective and answerability is to be found in the last paragraph of Voloshinov's *Marxism and the Philosophy of Language*. Here, however, it lacks that touch of self-awareness, of immanentization (in the sense of Husserl's *épochè*), which is necessary in order

to unite the perceptual perspective with answerability as the focus of aesthetic intention. For Voloshinov, perspective relates to the ideological point of view. Such a point of view is deprived of the determinant factor of answerability. It has lost the knowledge of the relativity of all statements, which does not, as Voloshinov claims, turn a statement into a 'mere belief as an expression of a casual subjective state of mind', but which rather abandons ideology's pretensions to absolute truth by referring to the relativity even of the universal human point of view. However, Voloshinov's 'determined and categorical social value judgment' stands by its word without *understanding* it, and therefore cannot be responsible for it (MPL 1929: 157).

Already in his programmatic statement 'Art and Answerability' (1919), Bakhtin uses the term *otvetstvennost'* (answerability or responsibility) in the sense of a perception which both understands and is understood. In this short article Bakhtin asserts that the separation of art and answerability, and the opposition produced by it, results in a deficiency in philosophical thought. We must regain the fundamental unity of art and answerability which aestheticism has abandoned. By breaking with the 'prose of life', art ascends to the heights of inspiration, where life cannot follow.

This argument can be misunderstood in many different ways. One might take it as an argument for a realistic view of everyday life. As we have seen, however, such a relation to the *content* of life neutralizes the axiological perspective of art that is bound to *form*. The work of art would be reduced to a mere possibility of life, to mere fiction. This would destroy art's relation to answerability. Neither does the 'prose of life' relate to the life of the artist. The relationship between art and life is indirect. It is derived from both phenomena's dependence on answerability, which stands above both of them. Answerability gives axiological weight to life *and* to art. A frivolous life corresponds to art which does not take itself seriously, which makes no reference to the self-understanding contained within its architectonics.

This argument requires some explanation. With a measure of technical artistic skill it is very easy to produce an arbitrarily complex network of words, sentences, or motives. The tendency to associate seems to be inherent in discursive material. Would it not then be easy to generate such associations in any material? The greater complexity of a work of art does not, however, lead automatically to greater aesthetic value. Often we prefer artefacts of simple, balanced perfection to the highly complex. The line

drawn here by aesthetic taste is explained by the fact that art is made by people for people, and depends upon the human world for its meaning.

In life one must be able to answer for any complexity. This refers not to the demands of everyday existence, but to the degree of understanding which one is able to reach in relation to life. Such understanding has its limits. If a piece of art does not respect those limits it gambles away its own ability to establish an architectonics that is connected with human sensibility. Then the number of potential compositional relations exceeds any possible complexity of *human* architectonics, which is similar to the situation of a score which pays no attention to the artist's fingering and is therefore unplayable. The 'production of a compositional complexity without respect to human architectonics' is one of the meanings which Bakhtin gives to the notion *montage*, which for him always has a negative sense.

In my attempts to understand and to gain answerability in life, I might feel inferior in the face of a highly complex artistic product. But if the work of art is really incapable of transforming its composition into human architectonics, then even the most audacious work of art is nothing but a casual idea which in no way gives man his spiritual shape. Such art, according to Bakhtin, comes not from *inspiration* but from *usurpation*. This opposition could be described as the difference between art which only simulates an architectonic, and art which sustains a confrontation with life. Such a confrontation occurs in every aesthetic perception, although the inability of any one reader to establish the architectonic of a work does not deny its aesthetic quality. Embodying the ideal of sense-orientated aesthetic activity in relation to a given work of art, the author is the criterion for an appropriate perception. It is not the real author who answers for the architectonic (and he may not even match that ideal); the work of art is not his, but awaits its *aesthetic* author.

This means that in a purely aesthetic sense the author is not the producer of the complex construction, rather, the author is the human existence which assumes answerability for the inherent architectonics of the text, and which finds an appropriate human attitude toward the aesthetic object. What for aesthetic intention is answerability, for the aesthetic object is axiological value. This value forms the aesthetic object and gives it inner unity, while answerability gives the one who is able to perceive a sense of the unity of the perspectival rhythm arising from his aesthetic perception. In aesthetic activity man forms himself in his own ideal shape, forms himself into a human being.

The non-contingent, spiritual face of man and of his world is created in aesthetic activity; this is the transcendental meaning of authorship. Nevertheless, such a concept of authorship does not turn the author into a deity, since the author is not responsible for his very being, but only for its *meaning*, which is located in the human perspective of perception.

NOTES

1. See Aage Ansgar Hansen-Löve, 'Existenzialisierung der Formalen Methode', in Hansen-Löve, *Der russische Formalismus: methodologische Rekonstruktion seiner Entwicklung aus dem Prinzip der Verfremdung* (Vienna: Verlag der Österreichischen Akademie der Wissenschaften, 1978), pp. 571-86.

2. The difference between 'author-image' and 'abstract author' is extensively discussed by Wolf Schmid, 'Die narrativen Ebenen *Geschehen, Geschichte, Erzählung* und *Präsentation der Erzählung*' in *Wiener Slawistischer Almanach*, 9, pp. 83-110.

3. See Boris Groys, 'Problema avtorstva u Bakhtina i russkaia filosofskaia traditsiia' [The Problem of Authorship in Bakhtin and the Russian Philosophical Tradition], *Russian Literature*, 26.2 (1989), pp. 113-30.

4. Paul de Man, *Allegories of Reading: Figural Language in Rousseau, Nietzsche, Rilke, and Proust* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1979); see especially chapters 2 and 8.

5. See Matthias Freise, *Michail Bachtins philosophische Ästhetik der Literatur* (Frankfurt am Main: Lang, 1993), pp. 218-20.

6. Roland Barthes, *Image, Music, Text* (trans. S. Heath; London: Fontana, 1977), p. 145.

7. Examples: Iurii Lotman in *Struktura khudozhestvennogo teksta* (Moscow: Iskusstvo, 1970), pp. 41; 321-22; 345-47 [English translation: *The Structure of the Literary Text*, Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 1977]. Wolf Schmid, *Der Textaufbau in den Erzählungen Dostoevskijs* (Munich: Wilhelm Fink Verlag, 1973), p. 24; and W. Schmid, *Ornamentales Erzählen in der russischen Moderne* (Frankfurt am Main; New York, 1992), pp. 26ff. where he discusses 'the abstract author as creator'.

8. Roland Barthes, 'The Death of the Author', in Barthes, *Image, Music, Text* (London: Fontana, 1977), pp. 142-48; M. Foucault, 'What is an Author?', in *Bulletin de la Société Française de Philosophie*, 7.9 (1969).

9. See my criticism of Voloshinov's conception of the literary text in *Michail Bachtins philosophische Ästhetik der Literatur*, pp. 163-76.

10. John M. Ellis, *Against Deconstruction* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1989), p. 118.