

Morte D'Author: An Autopsy · *Harvey Hix*

*"it would be enough for me to know
who is writing this"*
— *W. S. Merwin*

IN 1968, ROLAND BARTHES proclaimed the death of the author in a manner reminiscent of Nietzsche's proclamation of the death of God. Yet, similarities in manner notwithstanding, the two proclamations are radically different in nature. Nietzsche's proclamation is an obituary; Barthes' is a suicide note, and an enigmatic one at that, for "this enemy of authors is himself preeminently an author, a writer whose varied products reveal a personal style and vision."¹ And what is worse than the fact that Barthes, himself an author, proclaimed the death of the author, is that he proclaimed it in writing. Assent to Barthes' claim has been, not surprisingly, far from universal; however, in recent years increasing attention has been given to the phenomenon it attempts to describe.

In the investigation of any mysterious death, one of the first steps is normally the positive identification of the body. Yet this step seems to have been left out of the investigation of the death of the author. No one (including Barthes himself as well as his detractors) seems to be sure who died. For this reason, I shall attempt in this paper to perform an autopsy in both senses of the word.² I shall examine the author's corpse with a special concern to establish its identity, and I shall study the event of the author's death by analyzing texts relevant to it.

Barthes only hints at the history of the author; he says that the "author is a modern figure" which our society produced as it discovered (under the influence of British empiricism, French rationalism, and the Reformation) "the prestige of the individual."³ Michel Foucault gives a slightly fuller account in his essay "What Is an Author?" noting two features of the author's history. First, in apparent agreement with Barthes' characterization of the author as "the epitome and culmination of capitalist ideology" (p.143), Foucault says:

it was at the moment when a system of ownership and strict copy-right rules were established (toward the end of the eighteenth and

beginning of the nineteenth century) that the transgressive properties always intrinsic to the act of writing became the forceful imperative of literature.⁴

The intrinsic transgressive properties of writing result from its being “an action situated in a bipolar field of sacred and profane, lawful and unlawful, religious and blasphemous” (p. 124). It only came to be considered a product or possession to be “assigned real authors” instead of mythical or religious figures when “the author became subject to punishment” (p. 124). The second feature Foucault points out is that the role of the author has changed over time. What we now call “scientific” texts were, in the Middle Ages, only considered truthful if they were sanctioned by the name of an author; however, this changed in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, according to Foucault, so that these texts came to be “accepted on their own merits.” On the other hand, texts we now call “literary” were once accepted without concern for the author’s identity; then the attitude toward literary texts shifted so that “‘literary’ discourse was acceptable only if it carried an author’s name” (pp. 125–26).

If Barthes and Foucault are right about the author’s history, then the fact that the author is a modern figure raises questions about his or her place in larger historical movements, as well as questions about whether the death of the author is not merely a result of the decline of the historical factors that created her or him. But the history of the author is not the main concern of Barthes or Foucault, nor will it be my concern in this essay. I will mention the history of the author only in order to further my attempt to identify the author, just as Barthes and Foucault are interested in this history only insofar as it points to the fact that “in our day, literary works are totally dominated by the sovereignty of the author” (Foucault, p. 126). Barthes makes this his first real criticism. After only an introductory paragraph and brief hints at the author’s history, he says:

The author still reigns in histories of literature, biographies of writers, interviews, magazines, as in the very consciousness of men of letters anxious to unite their person and their work through diaries and memoirs. The image of literature to be found in ordinary culture is tyrannically centered on the author, his person, his life, his tastes, his passions . . . (p. 143)

The attempt to dethrone the author, though, is hardly new with Barthes. It is easy to find examples of this project in many earlier twentieth-century critics. For instance, T. S. Eliot said, "The progress of an artist is a continual self-sacrifice, a continual extinction of personality."⁵ To the New Critics, the "intentional fallacy" was a mortal sin. And Northrop Frye says in *Anatomy of Criticism*:

The absurd quantum formula of criticism, the assertion that the critic should confine himself to "getting out" of a poem exactly what the poet may vaguely be assumed to have been aware of "putting in," is one of the many slovenly illiteracies that the absence of systematic criticism has allowed to grow up. This quantum theory is the literary form of what may be called the fallacy of premature teleology.⁶

How, then, is Barthes' proclamation of the death of the author any different from such statements as these? Gregory T. Polletta points out one way in which Barthes is different: most critics expelled authorial intention "in order to ensure the correct interpretation of literary works. Barthes, on the other hand, excludes the author's declared intention in order to release the text from any authoritarian control or interpretative circumscription."⁷ Before we can isolate any further differences or evaluate Barthes' claim, it will be necessary to decide just who the author is.

Traditionally, the author seems to have been credited with (and to have taken credit for) two primary functions: being the source of the work and/or the channel through which the work flows. Any random survey of literature will confirm this, and it is especially easy to see in the tradition of the invocation. The *Iliad* and *Odyssey* strongly emphasize the channel function. The *Odyssey* begins:

Tell me, Muse, of the man of many ways, who was driven
far journeys, after he had sacked Troy's sacred citadel.

.

From some point
here, goddess, daughter of Zeus, speak, and begin our story.⁸

It is not surprising to find the bard claiming such a role in an oral tradition, where the story comes almost "ready-made," not only in plot but even in

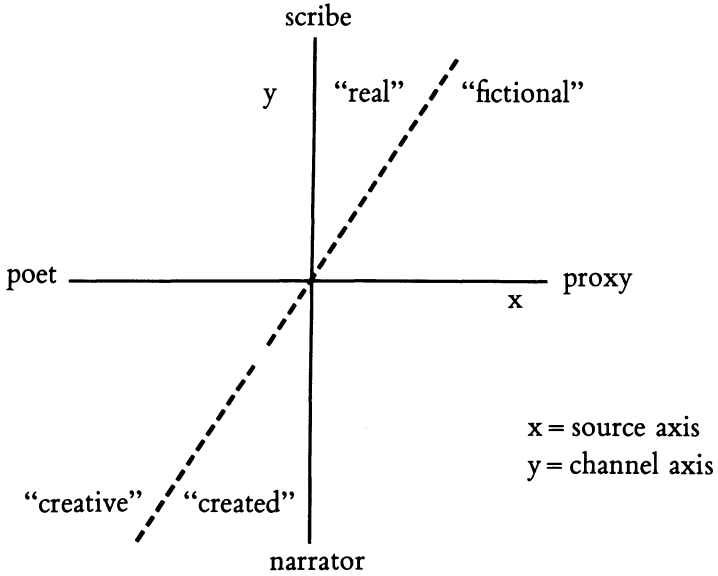
the formulae which are the basic units of composition. Ovid’s invocation to the *Metamorphoses*, though, emphasizes the author as source:

My intention is to tell of bodies changed
 To different forms; the gods, who made these changes,
 Will help me—or I hope so—with a poem
 That runs from the world’s beginning to our own days.⁹

Here it is the poet who is doing the telling. The gods are only helpers; the poet is not even sure of their help, and capable of writing with or without them. In Chaucer’s *Troilus and Criseyde*, the roles are more equal: Chaucer takes the poem as *his* project, but he also seems to need the help of Thesiphone.

I have intentionally avoided questions about the purpose of the invocation because it seems fair to say that, regardless of its role within the poem, the invocation still points to the conception of the author as source and as channel.¹⁰ But there are other questions which cannot be avoided. For example, is the bard really the author of the *Odyssey*? Is Chaucer himself really calling on Thesiphone, or has he created a persona? To account for the problems raised by such questions as these, and to evaluate properly “the death of the author,” a model of the author is necessary, one which tradition will not supply.

The following diagram represents the model of the author I propose.



The poet, scribe, proxy, and narrator are four “aspects” of the author, and are differential entities in Saussure’s sense. That is, they are “defined not by their positive content but negatively by their relations with the other terms of the system. Their most precise characteristic is in being what the others are not.”¹¹ In any given text, it may be that not all four aspects of the author are present, or it may be that two of the aspects are indistinguishable as regards that text. It may also be the case that, for instance, the poet and scribe are different people or that the poet is not a person at all. With those qualifications in mind, let me offer some approximate definitions and then some examples to help clarify the differences between the four aspects.

The poet is the person to whom the work is attributed. I use the word poet because of its etymology; the poet is most often the person given credit for having made the work. The poet is the person who carries (and lends to the work) authority. It should be pointed out that, although for the sake of convenience I refer to the poet as a person, the poet (as mentioned above, and as the examples will show) in some cases will not be a person. The scribe is the historical person who wrote down the work. These are the two “creative” aspects of the author, and they are usually “real” people as compared to fictional people.

The two “created” or “fictional” aspects of the author are the narrator and the proxy. The narrator, of whom critics have long been aware, is sometimes referred to as the persona. The narrator is a character in the work, and is most visible and also closest to the scribe and poet in a narrative written in the first person. The proxy is what Foucault describes when he says: “these [facets] of an individual, which we designate as an author (or which comprise an individual as author), are projections, in terms always more or less psychological, of our ways of handling texts.”¹² In other words, when we ascribe motivations, intentions, etc., to an author, we can only do so on the basis of the author as presented by the text, not on the basis of the historical author (the poet or scribe), who is, at least as regards the text, lost to us forever.¹³ Thus, the proxy is the “author” as created by the interaction of text and reader.

A few examples should help to distinguish between the poet, scribe, proxy, and narrator, and should demonstrate the usefulness of this model of the author. Homer, for instance, has been a problematic case of authorship. Whom do we mean when we refer to Homer? Milman Parry showed

in the 1930s that the *Iliad* and *Odyssey* were composed orally, and since then the scholarly consensus seems to be that the *Iliad* and *Odyssey* were not composed by the same person, nor was either poem written down by the bard (or bards) who composed it.¹⁴ What is more, the fact that the poems were made almost entirely from formulae garnered from the long oral tradition blurs the distinction between the composition of the poems and the performance of them. It is clear that the author/text relationship in the Homeric poems is not simple, nor does it fit well into the “naive” idea of authorship. And while the model of the author I propose does not answer all the questions about the authorship of the *Iliad* and *Odyssey*, it does at least give us an improved way of describing the complex author/text relationship.

Since the composition of the poems appears to have been distinct from the writing of them,¹⁵ we can speak of the composer as the poet, and the writer as the scribe. In this instance, the poet could be said to include not only the bard (or bards) who composed the poems, but the tradition which provided the story and the formulae from which the poems were almost wholly composed. One could, of course, include in every case the tradition out of which a work arises as a part of what I am calling the poet. However, I want to avoid that on pragmatic grounds, and include the tradition of a work as an aspect of its author in only this and equally unusual cases. My only justification for including the tradition here and excluding it elsewhere is the intuitive sense in which the Homeric oral tradition is more immediately linked to the creation of the poems than, say, the pastoral tradition is to *Lycidas*. The *Iliad* and *Odyssey* apparently reached their respective composers in much the same condition in which a pre-fabricated house reaches the construction crew for final assembly. The poems were already in recognizable units which were simply fitted together. In this sense, the bard(s) who composed the *Iliad* was unable to go outside his or her tradition, while Milton could have chosen to “bemoan a learned Friend” and “foretell the ruin of our corrupted Clergy” in a non-pastoral mode.¹⁶

Though the role of the scribe (to record the poems in writing) is easy to identify in the case of the Homeric poems, the scribe is as difficult to locate as the poet. Indeed, the scribe may not be a single person. No one knows when or by whom the poems were first written. Speculation has centered on the “Pisistratean recension”; this term refers to the “hypothetical Athe-

nian stabilization of the text" of the poems in connection with the Panathenaean festival and under the supervision of Pisistratus.¹⁷ But scholars are unsure about Pisistratus' exact role; no one knows whether Pisistratus was directly involved in the process or whether he only supervised it, and no one knows whether or not the first *official* written version (the version produced by the Pisistratean recension) was also the first written version of any kind. Probably for our purposes it is best to talk of Pisistratus as the scribe, but only in the sense that he symbolizes for us the process of writing down the poems.

Homer is an unusually clear example of the distinction between the poet and scribe, since in the case of Homer the poet and scribe are at least two different people. However, it is not necessary that there be two individuals for there to be a distinction between the poet and scribe. For instance, Coleridge describes the composition of "Kubla Khan" in the following way:

The Author continued for about three hours in a profound sleep, at least of the external senses, during which time he has the most vivid confidence, that he could not have composed less than from two to three hundred lines; if that indeed can be called composition in which all the images rose up before him as *things*, with a parallel production of the correspondent expressions, without any sensation or consciousness of effort. On awaking he appeared to himself to have a distinct recollection of the whole, and taking his pen, ink, and paper, instantly and eagerly wrote down the lines that are here preserved. At this moment he was unfortunately called out by a person on business . . . and on return to his room, found [that] . . . all the rest had passed away.

Though only one individual is involved, his state when he is acting as source is different enough from his state when he is acting as channel for us to make a clear distinction between the poet and the scribe of "Kubla Khan." Any significant change of state will be sufficient to make the same distinction. For instance, *Descartes' Conversation with Burman*, since it was apparently written down in its final form four days after the conversation itself, seems to be a good example of a distinction between poet and scribe based on scenic change. Burman acts as poet when he visits Descartes and

initiates the dialogue, but he does not act as scribe until four days later when he visits Clauberg.

Homer, Coleridge, and Burman provide clear examples of the poet/scribe distinction. But perhaps the clearest example of the proxy/narrator distinction is found in a satire such as Swift's *A Modest Proposal*. Northrop Frye calls satire "militant irony," that is, irony with clear moral norms, and with "standards against which the grotesque and absurd are measured." He says that irony can consistently maintain "complete realism of content" and "the suppression of attitude on the part of the author." However, satire "demands at least a token fantasy, a content which the reader recognizes as grotesque, and at least an implicit moral standard." Frye concludes that satire

breaks down when its content is too oppressively real to permit the maintaining of the fantastic or hypothetical tone. Hence satire is irony which is structurally close to the comic: the comic struggle of two societies, one normal and the other absurd, is reflected in its double focus of morality and fantasy.¹⁸

This "struggle of two societies" could also be thought of as a struggle of two levels of awareness, a struggle which has been described in two different ways. The first way is to refer to irony as "the narrowness of a character's vision as revealed by the more inclusive vision shared by author and reader." The second way is to accord the user of ironical language "an awareness of irony that is not necessarily less complex than our own." Here "irony is a simultaneous awareness of contrarities by a single consciousness."¹⁹ The first way, according to Everett Zimmerman, is a characteristic way of explaining irony in narrative, and makes the narrator "a character in a tale that defines him"; the second is a characteristic way of explaining irony in polemic, and makes the narrator "an authorial figure who defines the tale."²⁰

On my model of the author, though, both of these ways of describing the struggle between two levels of awareness are captured in the narrator/proxy distinction. Satire, according to this model, works on a disparity between the level of awareness of the narrator and that of the proxy, whose level of awareness is equivalent to that of the reader. The model can incorporate Zimmerman's first explanation of irony if we take the narrator

and proxy as distinct individuals. If we take the narrator and proxy as the same individual, impersonating another (or others) in the first instance and as her- or himself in the next, then we have Zimmerman's second explanation. We get, that is, "an image of Swift, sitting with his fellow wits in an Augustan drawing room . . . and personating [a Wotton, a Bentley, etc.], while simultaneously carrying on an ironic . . . running commentary on their absurdities."²¹ The "personating" Swift is the narrator and the commenting Swift is the proxy.

My model works out in *A Modest Proposal* something like this. The narrator is the "I" who offers the proposal, and the effect of the work depends on his being naive enough to be sincere. As Frye puts it: "one is almost led to feel that the narrator is not only reasonable but even humane; yet that 'almost' can never drop out of any sane man's reaction, and as long as it remains there the modest proposal will be both fantastic and immoral."²² It is the "almost" which creates the proxy, for though the narrator must be sincere for the piece to work, no sane person would believe the "author" to be sincere. And this "author" who is neither naive nor without ironic intent is the proxy.²³

The narrator and proxy do not begin as separate individuals; the first two paragraphs lay out the problem at hand, a problem both narrator and proxy are concerned with. But by the last sentence (when it is suggested that whoever could find a way to make the children of poor people an asset to the commonwealth should "have his statue set up for a preserver of the nation"), the author has put his tongue in his cheek by identifying with that great ironist Socrates. By the time the heart of the proposal is reached, of course, the narrator and proxy are completely separate. The narrator relates his discovery that a young, healthy child at a year old is "a most delicious, nourishing, and wholesome food," while the proxy by his very absence lends to this discovery its heavy satire.

The model of the author I propose is also effective on such unusual cases of authorship as the pre-Socratic philosophers. The fragments of Heraclitus are a good example, and will help in demonstrating the usefulness of this model and in refining our concepts of its four main terms. In the case of Heraclitus, there seem to be two poets, rather than one. Heraclitus himself is the first, since all our sources attribute the fragments to him. But one of the fragments says, "It is wise, listening not to me but to the [logos], to agree that all things are one."²⁴ The implication seems to be

that what gives Heraclitus' words their authority is their agreement with the *logos*, so that the *logos* is the authority behind the authority of Heraclitus. In other words, the *logos* is a second poet.²⁵ If Heraclitus' case is unusual for having an auxiliary poet, then it is more unusual for having multiple scribes: apparently at least 28 different hands recorded one or more of the fragments. This is a feature which all the pre-Socratics share; the only extant works available for them are groups of fragments recorded by various scribes.

By far the most interesting aspect of the authorship of the fragments of Heraclitus is the proxy, who is also the most important as an interpretive tool. Not only is he created by the text, as is always the case with the proxy, but in the case of Heraclitus the proxy himself helps to create the text by being one of the standards against which fragments are tested for authenticity. Charles Kahn's careful elucidation of his own method of reading Heraclitus will help make this clear.²⁶ He makes use of two fundamental principles, *resonance* and *linguistic density*. His definition of these terms is worth quoting at length:

By *linguistic density* I mean the phenomenon by which a multiplicity of ideas are expressed in a single word or phrase. By *resonance* I mean a relationship between fragments by which a single verbal theme or image is echoed from one text to another in such a way that the meaning of each is enriched when they are understood together. These two principles are formally complementary: resonance is one factor making for the density of any particular text; and conversely, it is because of the density of the text that resonance is possible and meaningful. This complementarity can be more precisely expressed in terms of 'sign' and 'signified,' if by *sign* we mean the individual occurrence of a word or phrase in a particular text, and by *signified* we mean an idea, image, or verbal theme that may appear in different texts. Then density is a one-many relation between sign and signified; while resonance is a many-one relation between different texts and a single image or theme.²⁷

Resonance, Kahn says, "taken together with explicit statements of identity and connection . . . will serve to link together all the major themes of Heraclitus' discourse into a single network of connected thoughts"

(p. 90). Linguistic density makes the meaning of any one fragment “essentially multiple and complex” (p. 91); that is, it makes the fragment meaningfully ambiguous.

Here the proxy enters as an interpretive tool, for Kahn says, “It will often be convenient to speak of *deliberate* or *intentional* ambiguity. I think these expressions are harmless and justified, as long as it is clearly understood that there is no external biographical evidence for imputing such intentions to Heraclitus” (p. 91). In other words, it is harmless and justified to speak of deliberate or intentional ambiguity as long as it is understood that the reference is to the intention of the proxy, not the poet.

Reading the fragments with Kahn’s assumptions results in “a prose style which fully justifies Heraclitus’ reputation as ‘the obscure’ (*ho skoteinos*)” (p. 95). However, such a reading does not stop at creating a proxy with this reputation; it also forces him to live up to it. For instance, Kahn gives primacy to fragment L, “As they step into the same rivers, other and still other waters flow upon them,” instead of its more celebrated counterpart, “one cannot step twice into the same river,” because the former is “the only statement on the river whose wording is unmistakably Heraclitean” (p. 167). Then, commenting on fragment CXVII,²⁸ Kahn first notes its length and clarity, and then makes this comment: “The absence of anything enigmatic in this text might almost cast doubt on its authenticity, if different portions were not cited by good and independent sources (Clement, and Celsus in Origen)” (p. 266). The proxy has developed such a reputation for obscurity and ambiguity that he is able to render any unambiguous text not backed by dependable sources doubtful or inauthentic. And he does just that to a doxographical account of the *logos* in Sextus Empiricus.²⁹ Kahn says of the “physical identification of the ‘common *logos*’ with the circumambient atmosphere or *pneuma*” that it is unsupported by evidence from the fragments and that

this doctrine is also un-Heraclitean in its unambiguous precision: it states a psychophysical theory which happens to be false, but which some ancients believed to be true. But it preserves no hint of that poetic resonance and density that make Heraclitus’ own statements on sleep profoundly meaningful for a modern reader, who can no longer take seriously the ancient theory stated in the commentary. (p. 295)

It seems, then, that Kahn and the fragments have created a proxy who could not have merely stated with “unambiguous precision” a theory now known to be false and no longer “profoundly meaningful for a modern reader.” In this way the proxy is not merely shaped by the text but also helps to shape it simultaneously.

With his model of the author in mind, it will now be possible to undertake the second leg of our autopsy, an examination of texts relevant to the death of the author. I will focus on Barthes’ “The Death of the Author” and William Gass’ response to that work in an essay by the same name.³⁰ I hope to show that Barthes’ fundamental project is to sever the “creative” author (the poet and scribe) from the “created” author (the proxy and narrator), while Gass attempts to reestablish their unity.

Barthes is rebelling against a model of reading which could be compared to the pre-Socratic search for the *arche*. Aristotle says the earliest philosophers sought a single material principle, “that of which all things that are consist, the first from which they come to be, the last into which they are resolved.” This principle is the source of all things, and is always conserved.³¹ Thus, the first step toward understanding the world is to locate this principle. Criticism has often taken the author to be similar to the *arche* not only in the sense of being the source of the work, but also as being conserved in it. Barthes, though, makes it clear in the first paragraph of “The Death of the Author” that he is out to show that the author is not conserved in the text, for he says, “Writing is the destruction of every voice, of every point of origin. Writing is that neutral, composite, oblique space where our subject slips away, the negative where all identity is lost, starting with the very identity of the body writing” (p. 142). The word “writing” appears three times in this passage, and in the first two instances it is not clear whether Barthes means by “writing” a) the *act* of writing, or b) what is written. The word appears throughout the essay, and it appears with both meanings.

In the first part of the essay, Barthes seems to concentrate on the first meaning. He mentions several writers who have tried to loosen “the sway of the Author,” beginning with Mallarmé, who, Barthes says, recognized that “it is language which speaks, not the author” (p. 143). The reference is to the act of writing, for Barthes continues, “to write is . . . to reach that point where only language acts, ‘performs,’ and not ‘me’” (p. 143). Barthes cites as further examples Valéry and Proust, then mentions Sur-

realism, which “contributed to the desacrilization of the image of the Author by ceaselessly recommending the abrupt disappointment of expectations of meaning (the famous surrealist ‘jolt’), by entrusting the hand with the task of writing as quickly as possible what the head itself is unaware of” (p. 144). Again, the focus is on the act of writing. Here, though, the focus begins to shift. Barthes says that modern linguistics has shown that “the whole of enunciation is an empty process, functioning perfectly without there being any need for it to be filled with the person of the interlocutors” (p. 145). Barthes takes this to mean that the action is separated from the actor. The author is no longer “the past of his own book.” The temporality of writing is different; “every text is eternally written *here and now*.” This means that Barthes is free to conflate writing (act) and writing (what is written); there is no longer any difference. And, more importantly for Barthes, it means that only writings can write, not authors. The author’s “only power is to mix writings, to counter the ones with others” (p. 146). Now “writing . . . can know no halt: life never does more than imitate the book, and the book itself is only a tissue of signs, an imitation that is lost, infinitely deferred” (p. 147). Barthes’ shift of the meaning of the word “writing” is now complete: “*writing* can no longer designate an operation of recording, notation, representation, ‘depiction’ (as the Classics would say)” (p. 145); instead, it should supplant the world “literature” (p. 147).

Now Gregory Polletta’s statement, quoted above, explaining how Barthes’ “death of the author” differs from other attempts to dethrone the author, is clearer. Barthes releases the text “from any authoritarian control” by releasing it from the hands of the “Author-God” into the hands of the reader, and he relegates the author to the rank of “scriptor.” He says:

In the multiplicity of writing, everything is to be *disentangled*, nothing *deciphered*; the structure can be followed, ‘run’ (like the thread of a stocking) at every point and at every level, but there is nothing beneath: the space of writing is to be ranged over, not pierced; writing ceaselessly posits meaning ceaselessly to evaporate it. (p. 147)

Previously, the text was a cloth to be unraveled by the reader; if the cloth were unwound all the way, the reader would find the author holding the

other end. But Barthes makes the text into a shroud, and no one, not even a corpse, is holding the other end. The Author-God has not been resurrected; he or she has simply disappeared. In terms of my model of the author, Barthes completely separates the two “real” aspects of the author (the poet and scribe) from the two “fictional” aspects (the proxy and narrator). More importantly, though (and this is what prompts him to speak of the “death of the author”), he says the “real” aspects of the author are fictional and the “fictional” aspects are the only real ones. That is, he denies any real creative power to the “creative” author, who has become for Barthes “only a ready-formed dictionary,” “never more than the instance writing.”³² The poet and scribe, to the extent that they are real, are completely severed from the text; only the proxy and narrator remain, and they are at the mercy of the reader.

William Gass, however, rejects this conclusion. He affirms the creative power of the author, and attempts to reunite the “creative” and “created” aspects of the author. Gass begins by criticizing the comparison of the death of the author with the death of god; not only is there a disanalogy, he says, but the “two expressions are metaphors which are the reverse of one another.” The death of god implies that gods have never existed and that belief in god “is no longer even irrationally possible” (p. 3). But the death of the author “signifies a decline in authority, in theological power, as if Zeus were stripped of his thunderbolts and swans, perhaps residing on Olympus still, but now living in a camper and cooking with propane. He *is*, but he is no longer a god” (p. 3). Gass quotes John Crowe Ransom’s statement, from an essay about *Lycidas*, that “Anonymity, of some real if not literal sort, is a condition of poetry,” and makes the important point that “In this case the arrogance, the overbearing presence, of the author is at one with his disappearance” (p. 4). It is the act of writing which is the “essential artistic task,” and if the author hides, it is only so that the reader will seek. The hiding is a ploy, as in *Moll Flanders*, *Gulliver’s Travels*, and *The History of Henry Esmond*:

These novels have authors, to be sure, but they are artificial ones, replacement pens or “dildoes.” Still, no one will imagine that Defoe or Swift or Thackeray felt that by placing these fictions in front of themselves they were risking their lives. No one is done in by a dildo . . . These artful dodges (and it would be awful if they fooled

anyone) strengthen the concepts of source and voice and purpose, control and occasion, which are central to the notion of a commanding creator. (pp. 6–7)

Gass' point, which he takes several more pages to develop, is that "the elevation or removal of the author is a social and political gesture, not an aesthetic one" (p. 11). The level of a work's anonymity has no bearing on the work's quality, and, Gass says, it certainly doesn't mean that no one did it. Even authors who deliberately efface themselves are creators.

What does happen, according to Gass, is that in removing him- or herself from the text, an author also removes the reader; "if no one has written or posted the word, then no one is addressed by the word" (p. 13). Still, even in removing the self, an author "does not omit to leave his signature behind, just the same. Indeed he not only signs every sheet, he signs every word" (p. 14). This is how writing differs from speech, and as Gass sees it, this is what makes an author an author.³³ There are many authorless texts, such as a grocery sacker mindlessly saying, under orders of the store manager, "Have a nice day." No one authors those words, Gass says, but "It is necessary to say we author what we write precisely because what we write is disconnected from any mouth we might actually observe" (p. 19). It is the ability to create, not merely regurgitate texts previously ingested, which defines the author for Gass, and the absence of the author from the text in no way diminishes this. The person of the author, whether discovered or not, still determines the quality of the work: "literally millions of sentences are penned or typed or spoken every day which have only a source—a spigot or a signboard—and not an author" (p. 24). Gass ends his article by saying that authors "re-fuse," while readers "simply comprise the public" (p. 26).

Gass' last-second insult against his audience is perhaps the most pointed example of the primary difference between himself and Barthes. Barthes privileges the "created" author, over the "creative" author, which makes the reader a powerful figure. Gass, on the other hand, privileges the "creative" author, and makes the reader almost powerless.

Both Barthes and Gass recognize a distinction between the creative author and the created author. Barthes, as mentioned above, makes a subtle transition between writing as an act and writing as what is written, during which the "Author" (creative) is replaced by the "scriptor" (created author):

The Author, when believed in, is always conceived of as the past of his own book. . . . In complete contrast, the modern scriptor is born simultaneously with the text, is in no way equipped with a being preceding or exceeding the writing, is not the subject of the book as predicate. (p. 145)

Gass is aware of the same distinction. He talks at some length about the poet the reader projects from the poem, and he makes it clear that this projected poet is not a person, "but the poet of the poem." He mentions Hume's warning that if we are to infer a creator from the evidence of a creation, we can only attribute to it what would be necessary to produce that creation. This means that the author's name designates not the "personality behind the art, but . . . another kind of slippery fiction." And,

if we believe at all in the Unconscious, or in the impossibility of literally nothing escaping the author's clear awareness and control, then the artificial author (the author which the text creates, not the author who creates the text) will be importantly different from the one of flesh and blood, envy and animosity, who holds the pen, and whose picture enlivens the gray pages of history. (p. 21)

Barthes' privileging of the created author is the clue to what he means by "the death of the author." Barthes observes, quite correctly, that the reader, encountering a text, has access only to the proxy and narrator, not the poet and scribe. But Barthes errs synechdochically; he concludes that because the poet and scribe are "dead" (i.e., separated forever from the text), the whole author, including the proxy and narrator, is dead. he would perhaps escape this charge if he were consistent in using the term "author" to refer only to the poet and scribe, and kept his use of "author" always distinct from his use of "scriptor." But his discussion on pp. 143ff. of Mallarmé, Valéry, Proust, et. al. is inconsistent with his own claims: he clearly refers to creative authors in their relations to the texts they created, and he refers to them as if they were not "dead."³⁴

Gass also speaks of creative authors as if they were not dead, but in doing so he does not violate his claims, since he is trying to show that Barthes is wrong. Gass directs attention to his own crime, though, with this criticism of Barthes:

If Roland Barthes had been interested in radically simplifying the final solution to the Author Question . . . he could have adopted the “single author” theory. . . . Then, with this plurality of persons—both real, inhuman, artificial, and imaginary—reduced to manageable proportions, a single stroke across the top of the word would have been enough. (p. 23)

The implication is not that Barthes *could have* made authors homogeneous, but that he *did* make authors homogeneous. Unfortunately, Gass is guilty of the same sin in reverse: he affirms the heterogeneity of authors, but he makes readers homogeneous.

Of course neither authors nor readers are homogeneous, and the answer to the question of the death of the author will not be found by choosing sides. The relationships between authors, their texts, and the readers of their texts vary greatly, but it should be clear by now that there is always a mutual interdependence. The author *is* dead in the limited sense that the poet and scribe are forever removed from the text and the reader as soon as the creative act is finished. But the author is dead *only* in that sense, for the author includes that proxy and narrator as well as the poet and scribe, and these are created as much by the reader as by the poet.

Barthes and Gass both take the question of the death of the author as a theological question, so it is only fitting that our autopsy end with a metaphor taken from religion. Barthes and Gass agree that the author is no longer a god. However, as our autopsy has shown, the author is at least a human, with a body (the creative author) and a soul (the created author). Viewed in this way, Barthes’ claim seems to be that the author has died and there is no afterlife; Gass, on the other hand, seems to claim that there is an afterlife for the author—with a *bodily* resurrection. I think our autopsy, though, points to a *via media*: the author’s body has died; there is an afterlife; the author’s soul lives on.

NOTES

1. Jonathan Culler, *Roland Barthes* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1983), p. 11.
2. *Webster’s New World Dictionary* lists two definitions for autopsy (from the Greek *autopsia*, a seeing with one’s own eyes): “1. an examination and dissection of a dead body, esp. by a coroner, to discover the cause of death, damage done by disease, etc.; post-mortem 2. a detailed critical analysis of a book, play, etc., or of some event.”

3. Roland Barthes, "The Death of the Author," in *Image - Music - Text*, sel. and trans. Stephen Heath (New York: Hill and Wang, 1977), pp. 142-43. Further quotations from Barthes will be from this essay and will be cited parenthetically within the text by reference to the page numbers of this edition.
4. "What Is an Author?" in *Language, Counter-Memory, Practice*, ed. Donald F. Bouchard, trans. Donald F. Bouchard and Sherry Simon (Ithaca: Cornell Univ. Press, 1977), pp. 124-25. Further quotations from Foucault will be from this essay and will be cited parenthetically within the text by reference to the page numbers of this edition.
5. "Tradition and the Individual Talent," in *Twentieth Century Criticism: The Major Statements*, ed. William J. Handy and Max Westbrook (New York: The Free Press, 1974), p. 30.
6. *Anatomy of Criticism* (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1957), p. 17.
7. "The Author's Place in Contemporary Narratology," in *Contemporary Approaches to Narrative*, ed. Anthony Mortimer (Tubingen: Narr, 1984), p. 111. Polletta, in the paragraph from which I quote, is specifically comparing Barthes with Wimsatt and Beardsley. I have taken the liberty of applying his words to "most critics," since his insight seems to apply as well to Eliot, Frye, etc.
8. *The Odyssey of Homer*, trans. Richmond Lattimore (New York: Harper & Row, 1975), p. 27.
9. Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, trans. Rolfe Humphries (Bloomington: Indiana Univ. Press, 1955), p. 3.
10. I take it that no reader will doubt the conception of the author as the source of his work, since this seems to be the commonest notion today. That the author as channel is a notion that has been taken seriously is best shown by Plato's *Ion*.
11. Ferdinand de Saussure, *Course in General Linguistics*, ed. Charles Bally and Albert Sechehaye in collaboration with Albert Riedlinger, trans. Wade Baskin (New York: McGraw-Hill Book Co., 1959), p. 117. In this passage, Saussure's concern is, of course, linguistic value, but I mean to borrow only his definition of differential entities.
12. "What Is an Author?" p. 127. I have replaced Foucault's use of the word "aspects" with the word "facets" in order to avoid confusion with my use of "aspects" to denominate the parts of my model of the author.
13. This is not only true of authors now dead, but living authors as well; it is the basis of the New Critical dictum that the author is no more an authority on the text than any other reader.
14. Of the many discussions of this problem, two of the best are: Albert Lord, *The Singer of Tales* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard Univ. Press, 1960), and G. S. Kirk, *The Songs of Homer* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1962).
15. So that, as Cedric Whitman points out, writing is severed from composition, and becomes mere preservation of the poems. Whitman, *Homer and the Heroic Tradition* (New York: W. W. Norton and Co. 1965), p. 5.

16. There is a more difficult sense in which tradition has a (rather large) hand in the creation of the work: clearly, language defines the possibilities of the work. This will be discussed more in relation to Barthes, but I exclude language from my model of the author because it is outside of what is normally included in the concept of the author. (And even Barthes, who gives complete creative control to language, sets language against the concept of the author, instead of including one within the other:" . . . it is language which speaks, not the author" [Barthes, p. 143]).

17. Kirk, *Songs*, pp. 308–9.

18. *Anatomy of Criticism*, pp. 223–24.

19. Everett Zimmerman, *Swift's Narrative Satires: Author and Authority* (Ithaca: Cornell Univ. Press, 1983), p. 68. I feel justified in pitting Zimmerman's discussion of irony against Frye's discussion of satire since Zimmerman's concern here is with the irony in Swift, while satire for Frye is the type of irony which Swift makes use of.

20. Zimmerman, p. 69.

21. From Gardner Stout, "Speaker and Satiric Vision in Swift's *Tale of a Tub*," *Eighteenth Century Studies* 3(1969), p. 183, as quoted in Zimmerman, p. 69.

22. *Anatomy of Criticism*, p. 224.

23. I have mentioned above that the proxy can never be identified with the "historical author" (i.e., the poet and/or scribe), in this case Swift himself.

24. I will refer in my discussion of Heraclitus exclusively to Charles H. Kahn's excellent book *The Art and Thought of Heraclitus* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1979). This is fragment XXXVI in Kahn's translation, though I have retained the word *logos* for the purposes of my discussion.

25. Heraclitus seems not to be claiming that the *logos* is the source of his own words, which would be placing himself on the channel axis rather than the source axis; instead, he seems to be claiming that the *logos* is a touchstone on which his words will prove themselves true.

26. In "On Reading Heraclitus," pp. 87–95 of *The Art and Thought of Heraclitus*.

27. Kahn, p. 89.

28. "They are purified in vain with blood, those polluted with blood, as if someone who stepped in mud should try to wash himself with mud. Anyone who noticed him doing this would think he was mad. And they pray to these images as if they were chatting with houses, not recognizing what gods or even heroes are like." (Kahn, p. 266)

29. *Against the Mathematicians* VII. 126–34, in Kahn pp. 293–96.

30. William Gass, "The Death of the Author," *Salmagundi* 65 (Fall, 1984), pp. 3–26. Further references to this essay will be noted parenthetically within the text of the paper.

31. *Metaphysics*, A 3, 983b, trans. W. D. Ross, in *The Basic Works of Aristotle*, ed. Richard McKeon (New York: Random House, 1941), pp. 693–94.

32. It is worth noting that Barthes is not making the claim that no one “did it,” as Gass mistakenly claims (p. 11); instead, he is making a claim about what is involved in, and what follows after, the act of “doing it.”

33. Whether Gass is correct in his notion of the signature is not immediately clear. For a more thorough discussion of this issue, one might profitably consult Jacques Derrida’s essay “Signature Event Context,” *Glyph* 1, pp. 172–97. In that essay, Derrida contends that a similar claim by J. L. Austin is wrong. Derrida says instead that the condition of the possibility of the power of the signature is also the condition of the impossibility of that power. Interestingly, in making that claim he uses a metaphor similar to Barthes’ metaphor (mentioned above) of the text as a cloth. Barthes says that when the text is disentangled, there is no author clinging to the end of the thread; Derrida says that the signature is not capable of “tethering [the text] to the source.” (p. 194)

34. The clearest example is on p. 144, where he talks of “Proust *himself*” (my italics) blurring the relation between a writer and his characters.