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The periodical welcomes papers in both English and Greek on all aspects of Modern Greek Studies (broadly defined). Prospective contributors should preferably submit their papers on disk and hard copy. All published contributions by academics are refereed (standard process of blind peer assessment). This is a DEST recognised publication.

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for his heroic efforts to make this journal readable.
This issue is dedicated to Véronica and Andras.*

NASOS VAGENAS

University of Athens

IDENTITY AND POETIC DISCOURSE

Translated by Vrasidas Karalis

Perhaps, the most paradoxical of the ideas that nurtured the last decades of the 20th century in the field of literary studies is that of the Death of the Author. According to this idea, which became the emblem of postmodern theories of literature, the real author of a literary work is not the person who wrote the work but writing itself – more precisely, Language: that great transcendental force, which created the world, which is the word and outside of which nothing else exists. According to this theory, the person who writes a literary work is nothing but a medium who actualises the desire of Language to incarnate into tangible – that is into written – form its transcendental, divine spirit (in more accessible terms: a medium who actualises the desire of Language to create literature). Precisely because this spirit is transcendental, the person who performs through writing the literary desire of Language loses his or her own voice, face, and even his/hers very own identity. This person is transfigured into a neutral “hand, cut off from every voice, motivated by a pure movement of Scripture” (not of expression), a hand that “draws a field without origin”, a field which “has no other origin than language itself”.

Language takes that hand out of the multitude of people who use and write it as language. It takes that hand accidentally, not by choice. Herein lies its main difference from the older transcendental force, that was God, and which it has now dethroned. The relationship between Language and the actualiser of its literary desire, with the scribe (as the writer should be called from now on), is not the same as the relationship that connected in the past God with his chosen person (Moses for example); a person chosen because God knew that he possessed some special qualities, which empowered him to transmit the Divine Will to humanity. This happens, because, in opposition to God, Language is not interested in human beings, who are simply used by it in order to verify its own transcendentality to itself.

Equally paradoxical is this theory’s manner of articulation and a large part of its reception, considering that the style of its inaugurators is not impersonal at all – I mean it is a particularly expressive style (if not narcissistic); furthermore, the people who confirmed that

the author is dead are admired by those who have convinced them about the author's death by being great writers themselves.

Is literary writing truly the field of a force totally despotic and uncontrollable, the field wherein every trace of the person and of the writer's identity, that is of every effort for expression, is totally extinguished? Or does there exist within this field a weak point, which the writer manages to dominate and employ for his/her own purpose?

This question must be answered by specialists – more precisely, today, by over specialists. I believe that if we ask poets, who have a more internal knowledge of the literary phenomenon than that of many contemporary literary theorists, and consequently, a more pragmatic one, their reply would be that the first is not the case. They would tell us that the theory about the “Death of the Author” is so absurd, that it could have been expressed only by extremely sophisticated people and could have been accepted only by naive simpletons. This theory is based on an idea about the reality of language which is denied by the actuality of human communication. The questioning of the potential existence of the poet's personality in literary writing, the contempt for what the preachers of this theory call “metaphysics of presence” is in reality a metaphysical theory of absence – more precisely, it is pure idealism, since, in contrast to the object of its contempt, this theory questions or disregards every testimony of experience.

We can claim that the theory about the “Death of the Author” and its concomitant theory about the deconstruction of meaning employ within the linguistic field a paradox parallel to that by Zenon of Elea. Exactly as Zeno, by employing arguments falsified by reality, negates the possibility of motion, in a similar manner these theories, through sophistry (of the constant “deferral” of meaning) which (in contrast to what Zeno did with his syllogism) they perceive literally, question the ability of humans to articulate statements with claims of validity.

Albeit language has its own tendencies, and albeit great there may be the part of language which the poet can not control, that part which the poet can actually control is what elevates even its uncontrolled part into poetic discourse. The part of language that can be controlled by the poet is determined by the character of the poet's oral speech. No poem can be a real poem if it doesn't contain the character of the poet's way of speaking, which is formed by the inner self of the poet and in turn shapes the poetic voice of one's text. It is precisely this character that makes every poem being a poem. Because this character creates the field upon which those linguistic elements that the poet is made of can be inscribed. If literary writing is “the destruction of every voice, of every identity”, as we are told, these voices and identities do not belong to the poets who write the poem but to the intertextual elements inscribed within the field we have described. In reality, it is not about destruction but about the transformation of the voice and the identity of inscribed elements into poetic discourse; it is

about the metabolism, which also simultaneously moulds the voice of the text into poetic voice, into a linguistic configuration that makes the deeper depiction of the sensibility of the person who records it. The poetic text allows humans to portray and save, more faithfully than in any other way, their own identity.

Every poetic text is a personal discourse and, at the same time, an impersonal one (not in the sense of transcendental impersonality, which is purported by such theories). It is a personal discourse, because it can not be created without using as its yeast the specific character of the poet's oral speech. And it is an impersonal discourse, because the character of the poet's oral speech can not be seen. It is hidden; first, because poetic discourse imposes on the poet's voice the transcendence of autobiography and its expansion with essential elements from the voice of the human community (and here can be found its deeper humanity); secondly, because the character of the poet's oral speech is used in order to transform into poetic text the dough of the poet's language, which is the common language. However, such a character exists only mixed within the voice of the poetic text, which was created by it. It exists as the poet's personal voice, like a presence, a breath that constantly cancels the scriptibility of the poetic text. As it has been said, the discourse of the poetic text is oral speech; that is, living discourse that uses the form of writing in order to maintain its presence.

The act of transcribing such presence, which is the event of the poet's birth, is the precondition for the existence of readers. The Death of the Author does not lead to the birth of the reader, as it has been claimed by those who confirm that the Author is dead, but to the contrary: to the transition of the reader from being to non-being. Because what else is the reader's poetic experience if not the transcendence of the confines of the first person singular: the experience of an expansion, which can not be generated through the contact with an impersonal force, like the Language of the post-modernists, but only through the interlocution with the discourse of another – expanded – person, as it has been imprinted in the poetic text?

The transmutation of the common linguistic dough through the yeast we described is not motivated "by a pure motion for inscription" but by a motion for expression; and it is precisely this motion for expression that makes the yeast contain something more than linguistic elements. Because this motion, within the yeast, is the poet's desire to express what the poet feels about the world. If there is something outside the text this is the desire of a human being to talk about the world, a desire which is not produced by language but which produces the language, which in poetry is led to that form, to the supreme form, called expression. It is precisely the achievement of such supreme form that makes a creator out of the poet.

I feel uncomfortable that I have to use theoretically outmoded words (supposedly of exclusively romantic origin) such as expression and creation. I am doing so in the attempt to

describe the poetic phenomenon more accurately than the descriptions of theories about “the Death of the Author”. The poet is something more than a non-existent person. The poet is a creator, because what one creates didn’t exist before; because before the poem there was no poetic language from which someone could draw. Every word in a poem starts from the very beginning: it builds out of nothing its very poetic nature. Its poeticity is not transmitted to any other poem, because it gains its existence through the specific words surrounding it. It is created within the poem that contains it and exists only for that very poem.

Obviously, I use the word creator with the lower case, although I employ biblical images for reasons of enhanced effectiveness. I use such words with the intention of producing a successful metaphor, since poetic language is the language of essential religiosity; and simultaneously satisfying the human need to purify itself from the original sin of language: from the fragmentation of the word into sign and signified. Poetic language is the highest form of human endeavor to be elevated to the paradise of expression; and its success depends on the degree and the passion through which it regains the lost unity of the sign.