# ‘The Death of the Author’ and Ordinary Language Philosophy

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## Introduction

This article argues that skepticism in the humanities about authorship as it is informed by Roland Barthes’ ‘The Death of the Author’ is a subset of philosophical skepticism of other minds. To be skeptical about authorship is to be skeptical about either the relevance or epistemological accessibility of an author or their intentions in the practice of interpretation or evaluation. To be skeptical of other minds is either to be skeptical about the epistemological accessibility of the experiences or thoughts of any person that is not yourself or to be skeptical about whether others who appear to be persons are actually persons (and thus deserving of the moral consideration one expects for oneself). To demonstrate this comparison, I read Roland Barthes’ ‘The Death of the Author’ as the archetypical text advocating against the importance of authorial intention in interpretation and show that Barthes’ argument relies on and produces a skepticism of other minds in the process.

This approach is different from other engagements with Barthes’ article which either try to convict him of hypocrisy through reference to his later publications, or that try to show Barthes’ arguments to be simply self-defeating. The most generous version of this criticism of Barthes comes in Seán Burke’s otherwise impeccable 1992 book, *The Death and Return of the Author.*[1] While Burke shows his intense affection for Barthes’ thought throughout the work, his argument against the claims made specifically in ‘The Death of the Author’ ultimately rest on the idea that Barthes could not have possibly meant what he wrote, that he constructs a straw-man in the form of the Author-God which no one really believes in, and that his argument is a self-defeating lapse in judgement which he would almost immediately retreat from. Burke writes, ‘taking this claim [the analogy of author to God] at face

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value, it is not easy to see how the theologising of the author can be affirmed as a characteristic of twentieth century literary-critical discourse', noting that in neither American, Russian, or French literary criticism of his time was the author deified as Barthes claims before finally turning to Barthes' retreats from the author's death in *Sade-Fourier-Loyola* and *The Pleasure of the Text*.[2] Again, Burke's work is an important contribution to the literature on skepticism of authorship in the humanities, but this article adopts a different stance that takes seriously that Barthes meant and believed every word he wrote in 'The Death of the Author'.

To advance this argument I contextualize 'The Death of the Author' in reference to two traditions of thinking about language and expression, both of which are explicitly cited by Barthes in his polemic. The first is the tradition of mid-century French linguistics exemplified by Émile Benveniste and Barthes himself in his work prior to 'The Death of the Author'. Benveniste and Barthes (as well as some of their contemporaries) follow and develop concepts from Ferdinand de Saussure's structural semiology in developing a scientific approach that understands language as that which is always anterior to its use and, in Barthes' words, 'can never be separated from a sociality'.[3] The second tradition is the mid-century British philosophical movement called Ordinary Language Philosophy (OLP) as articulated by J. L. Austin, Ludwig Wittgenstein, and later generations of philosophers inspired by their work like Stanley Cavell, Richard Fleming, Nancy Bauer, and Avner Baz. OLP also articulates a vision of language which is always anterior to its use and which can never be separated from sociality, though it does so through investigating 'the conditions that make our talk and action[s] possible'.[4] In 'The Death of the Author' Barthes cites as part of his alternative to the now-dead Author 'what linguists [Benveniste], referring to Oxford philosophy [OLP], call a performative [Austin's most famous concept]' demonstrating the relation between the two traditions at the time of writing. This reference to Austin has to my knowledge never been taken up in the secondary literature on Barthes or mid-century French philosophy, with Derrida's 'Signature, Event, Context' serving as the introduction of OLP to the French scene. The crux of this article's argument is that Barthes' use of Austin's concept makes the difference between these two traditions legible in an especially perspicacious way. Unlike commentators on 'The Death of the Author' who take Barthes' article to be internally inconsistent or demonstrative of an exception in Barthes' thinking about language, this article argues that Barthes'

picture of language and writing is more or less consistent before, during, and after 'The Death of the Author'. What Barthes' reference to the 'performative' shows is not an inconsistency in his picture of language, but a picture of language reflective of a skeptical mood to which OLP offers an alternative. In other words, Barthes' skepticism concerning the role of authorial intentions in interpretation is a consequence of a skepticism of other minds pervasive in his picture of language and we do not need to follow Barthes toward the skeptical conclusion.

My argument in this article will advance in three stages. The first will analyze Barthes' concepts of writing, reading, and performativity in 'The Death of the Author' in comparison with his prior writings on those concepts (particularly from *Critical Essays* (1963) and *Criticism & Truth* (1965)) demonstrating how Barthes' arrives at a skeptical position in the 1967 essay. The comparison between Barthes' theory and OLP's alternative to the skeptical conclusion will mark the move to the argument's second stage through an engagement with OLP as articulated by Avner Baz, Nancy Bauer, and Stanley Cavell. Finally, drawing the comparison between the French and OLP traditions into relief, I read Barthes' skepticism as taking an easier path that we need not follow.

## French Linguistic Theory and 'The Death of the Author'

'The Death of the Author' is not an argument about why authorial intention *should not* matter to the interpretation of a given text, but one about why authorial intention *cannot* matter to interpretation. The appeal to intention is not described as one choice among many by Barthes; it is instead described as an appeal that one can no longer make in light of both discoveries in scientific linguistics and in the aesthetic practices of modern writers. In the seven pages of Barthes' polemic, he makes a variety of other arguments as well.

- that 'writing is the destruction of every voice, every point of origin' (p. 142)
- that subjectivity is a fundamentally linguistic and temporally intransitive (i.e., momentary) phenomenon (p. 145)

- that the modern writer (which he calls the 'scriptor') is an example of this temporally intransitive subject which has no being outside of the moment writing (pp. 143–46)
- that the reader of the modern text is also an example of this temporally intransitive subject (p. 148)
- that interpretation is not a practice of deciphering a single meaning hidden by an aesthetic or stylistic artifice (p. 147)
- that interpretation is instead a practice of disentangling the variety of languages and structures which make the text in front of you what it is (p. 147)
- that meaning is produced in the reader, in the act of reading (p. 148)
- that for the reader to become the producer of meaning the author must die (p. 148)
- that authorship is a historically contingent concept (p. 143)
- that both writers and critics who continue to appeal to an author are being in some way insincere (p. 143)
- that modern writing is a fundamentally performative act in the Austinian sense of the term (pp. 145–46)

The point of sketching Barthes' arguments in this way is to show the network of claims and arguments that result in the death of the Author—to reinforce that Barthes is not making an argument about why turning to the author is inadvisable. Rather, Barthes is making an argument, in the context of contemporaneous work concerning the nature of language and writing, that turning to the author as the guarantor of meaning is an impossibility. It is impossible because writing is the destruction of every voice; the moment one begins writing is the moment that one's words cease to belong to the one writing. Writing can be read by anyone in the absence of whatever voice (or voices) accompanied them in the moment of inscription. Further, this applies to all writing and all voices we might wish to find in that writing as we read. Reading and interpretation cannot be searching for an origin because the only origin available is language itself, the text in front of you and the language already anterior to you.

But Barthes goes further on this point than might be obvious because he is not merely writing about writing and reading, he is inscribing a whole conception of the momentariness of subjectivity into his conceptual network:

> Linguistically, the author is never more than the instance writing, just as the I is nothing other than the instance saying *I*: language knows a 'subject', not a 'person', and this subject, empty outside of the very enunciation which defines it, suffices to make language 'hold together', suffices that is to say, to exhaust it.[5]

Integrating the field of scientific linguistics into his argument, Barthes points us to an important context for the point he wants to make understood. In describing writing and reading in general, he is describing each instant of linguistic use (whether that be writing, reading, or speaking) at its most elemental level. Saying 'I' (whether the philosophical 'I think therefore I am' or the mundane 'I am hungry') enunciates the linguistic subject in the moment it happens and then both the scriptor-subject and the enunciation pass into absence exhausted *in the text*. The modern scriptor-subject performs the instance of writing and then that scriptor-subject passes away leaving only the inscription itself remaining. The moment of reading is, to Barthes, in no way different:

> Thus is revealed the total existence of writing: a text is made of multiple writings, drawn from many cultures and entering into mutual relations of dialogue, parody, contestation, but there is one place where this multiplicity is focused and that place is the reader […] The reader is the space on which all the quotations that make up a writing are inscribed without any of them being lost; a text's unity lies not in its origin but its destination. Yet this destination cannot any longer be personal: the reader is without history, biography, psychology; he is simply that someone who holds together in a single field all the traces by which the written text is constituted.[6]

Each moment of reading is constituted only in a momentary subject-reader's engagement with a text. The 'traces by which the written text is constituted' are not those left by the author, but those recognizable in the act of reading. If a given word in a text has radically changed meaning between the time of writing and the time of reading, the new connotation is then one of the traces constituting the text in the act of reading. Barthes is not writing here of any particular reader, but of a scientific concept of the reader in general and therefore cannot postulate any personal, historical, biographical, or

psychological features of that reader because each reader will differ in precisely those ways.

Focusing on the presence of a scientific discourse in 'The Death of the Author' opens the text to a wider engagement with Barthes' prior works which persistently call for a science of language or literature. Barthes' biographer Tiphaine Samoyault identifies his writings between 1955 and 1965 as informed by Barthes' desire for structuralist, systematic, scientific work on literature and culture; his desire for science was motivated by 'the quest for an intellectual order'.[7] Samoyault describes Barthes' conception of science during this period as 'situated […] relative to its own age and even ephemeral, involving a dual grasp of problems and objects—a grasp that was both sensual and intellectual'.[8] This dual character of a situated scientificity is helpful for understanding Barthes' concept of writing during this period. For instance, in the preface to his *Critical Essays* (1963), Barthes articulates the situation of the writer as one who comes to realize the truth of a scientific understanding of language: that their language is anterior, that it is not theirs, that it does not belong to them: 'My utterance can emerge only from a language [the language of others]: this Saussurean truth has a bearing beyond linguistics.'[9] The writer's embrace of this truth is the realization that 'Writing must go hand in hand with silence; to write is in a sense to become "still as death", to become someone to whom *the last word* is denied; to write is to offer others, from the start, that last word.'[10] Barthes will describe this coming to terms with one's death as 'an epic situation' marrying the intellectual understanding of scientific linguistics with the sensual decision to keep writing anyway.[11]

1965's *Criticism and Truth* emphasizes the structure of this epic situation, further elaborating the intellectual impersonality of a science of literature and the sensuous personality of reading. The science of literature, Barthes writes, 'cannot be the science of the content of works […] but a science of the conditions of content, that is to say of forms'.[12] Science here does not advocate for one meaning or another in the interpretation of texts, but provides reasons as to why and which meanings are acceptable at all 'as a function of the linguistic rules concerning symbols'.[13] From this restriction on science's territory follows further 'sacrifices which such a science would impose on those things that we love or believe we love in literature when we talk about it, that is to say, in many cases, *the author*'.[14] Herein we get a sketch of the argument Barthes will make in 'The Death of the Author'—that science cannot speak of *one* author. The reasons he gives here though are more

explicit: 'we refuse thus to allow the dead to hold the living in their grip, we free the work from the constraints of intention'.[15] Turning to the science of literature for Barthes frees the reader to interpret texts for whichever purposes they wish, for whichever purposes are called for in the time the work is read. This freedom is then both the freedom of the reader and the freedom of the critic precisely because reading and criticism are not science, they only take place in the world science describes: 'science deals with meanings, criticism produces them'.[16] The epic situation for the critic in *Criticism & Truth* arrives when Barthes asks the critic not to 'make me believe what you are saying, but even more, make me believe your decision to say it'.[17] Barthes' critic here 'does not know where he stands in relation to the science of literature' and is always at 'risk of adopting an empty discourse' that would ultimately prove to be meaningless to the reader.[18] The science of language for Barthes provides the critic (who is always also a writer) with the stakes of their project—to write is to make the reader believe that you both mean what you write and believe that it is important to write it, and to write in this way is always to leave open the possibility that you will fail.

The preface to *Critical Essays* is particularly helpful for fleshing out the inherent drama in Barthes' picture of language and writing. Barthes narrates the process by which a writer comes to understand the ramifications of the scientific view of language in the first person: 'A friend has just lost someone he loves, and I want to express my sympathy. I proceed to write him a letter.'[19] He describes finding false all of his attempts to phrase his sympathy, coming back again and again to a single word: 'condolences'. Barthes then narrates the process of realizing that just writing that one word as the letter will not communicate what he wants to be understood; he will come off as cold because *he will not be there to voice it*. He realizes that to communicate what he wants he needs to: 1) vary the forms and inscriptions of those 'condolences', 2) in such an original way that they appear to not be transformed. That succession of transformative constraints is 'literature itself', to Barthes.[20] For the varied second message (the writing) to effectively communicate both the initial first message (feeling) and its authenticity, it 'must be most "original", or, if you prefer, most "indirect"'.[21] Originality here relies on the writer's capacity to 'choose the best [variation], the one whose indirectness least distorts not what they want to say but what they want to make understood'.[22] And so the writer is caught in a trap of the sociality of language. On the one hand, we want to make understood a feeling through the use of written

words—we are writing for the other. On the other hand, as stated above, language is always anterior to me, it is not my language:

> that first message which was to express my grief immediately, that pure message which would denote just what it is in myself, is utopian; the language of others (and what other language could exist?) returns that message to me no less immediately decorated, burdened with an infinity of messages I do not want.[23]

Here we find the drama in Barthes' picture of language and writing. To communicate something as simple as 'condolences' cannot be done without the addition of copious rhetorical details and variations to protect against misunderstanding on one hand and banality on the other. Misunderstanding and banality are opposed in this way: too many variations and the reader will get tired of your repetitions, not enough and they might miss what you wanted to say in the first place.

Barthes' language in the preface to *Critical Essays* is filled with drama. The constraints on writing are 'fatal'; my message 'struggles to escape'; my language returns to me 'burdened' with the messages of others; writing precisely requires proceeding 'to the frontiers of language'; the writer is 'condemned' to vary their original message; banality and misunderstanding are 'the heaviest of threats' weighing on writing; the original message we want to communicate 'burns within us'; no one can write 'without passionately taking sides'; literature 'must do battle' with the platitudinous language of affectivity; the writers 'more arduously, more cruelly and less gloriously, detaches a secondary language from the slime of primary languages afforded him by the world'; the task of art is to 'kidnap from the world's language […] an exact speech'.[24] He closes this section of the preface by comparing the writer's task to the mythic task of Orpheus:

> All these techniques, results of the writer's necessity to start from a world and a self which the world and the self have already encumbered with a name, seek to institute an indirect language, in other words a language at once persistent (provided with a goal) and circuitous (accepting infinitely varied stations). This is, as we have seen, an epic situation; but it is also an 'Orphic' situation: not because Orpheus 'sings', but because the writer and Orpheus are both under the same

> prohibition, which constitutes their 'song': the prohibition from turning back toward what they love.[25]

An epic situation. This is a conception of writing as a kind of heroic and tragic achievement. It also seems to more align with how Barthes describes the mythic author he is seeking to dethrone in 'The Death of the Author': 'The author is thought to *nourish* the book, which is to say he exists before it, thinks, suffers, lives for it'.[26] But the images here also conflict. The mythic author is conceived of as a kind of father figure which only suffers as a form of generosity—laboring over the text but filling it with meaning. The Orphic writer is always tragically turning away from the meaning and desire which actually fuels the writing. We can read Barthes' description of the scriptor in that way, particularly following the historical trajectory he traces through Mallarmé, Valéry, and Proust. Barthes is describing how the writer *must conceive of themself* in the light of an understanding of the world in which no language is properly theirs. Language is always anterior, needing appropriation, and writing is the destruction of every voice, leaving 'the hand, cut off from any voice, borne by a pure gesture of inscription […] [tracing] a field without origin'.[27] There is a heroism there, in writing even as you know that not only is there no guarantee that what you meant will be understood, but that your very act of inscription is making that cut.

By positioning the writer/scriptor as a kind of heroic figure, we can see why Barthes shows such disdain for the contemporary critics and writers who hold on to a concept of the Author-God. Referring at one point to 'men of letters anxious to unite their person and their work through diaries and memoirs', at another to 'the pathetic view of [the modern scriptor's] predecessors' worrying about their capacity to capture their expressions, and at yet another to critics who allot themselves 'the important task of discovering the Author beneath the work: when the Author has been found, the text is "explained"—victory to the critic', Barthes is making an accusation of insincerity.[28] Holding on to the figure of the Author-God, either in how you conceive of your relation to your own work or in how you conceive of a text's relation to its production, means not taking seriously the drama of your situation. The insincere writer does not accept that they cannot guarantee the communication of what they want to make understood; the insincere critic submerges what they want to make understood in the authority of the Author-God. In other words, the critique of the Author-God is as much a critique of

that concept as it is a critique of a fear and insincerity that motivates its use. While the question of sincerity is not new in Barthes' work (*Criticism & Truth* is precisely about this kind of insincerity in Barthes' contemporary critics), in 'The Death of the Author' it does adopt a new frame of reference, 'what linguists, referring to Oxford philosophy, call a performative'.[29] Barthes here is citing Émile Benveniste's *Problems in General Linguistics* where Benveniste engages and finds common purpose with J. L. Austin's theory of speech acts. It is at this point that this discussion must turn to Ordinary Language Philosophy to both outline its similarities and differences from Barthes' picture of language and show how the drama of Barthes' picture is caught up in the skeptical problem of other minds.

## Ordinary Language Philosophy and Skepticism

Ordinary Language Philosophy refers primarily to the work of a group of post-war philosophers in England including J. L. Austin, Gilbert Ryle, P. F. Strawson, and Ludwig Wittgenstein, flourishing between the 1940s and 1960s.[30] Geoffrey Warnock describes the label itself as contested, 'more often used by enemies than by the alleged practitioners of what it was intended to designate'.[31] Traces of OLP remained relevant in various subfields of analytic philosophy following the tradition's decline in the 1960s.[32] This article picks up on the tradition as it was maintained through the work of one of Austin's students, Stanley Cavell, who was particularly attentive to how the anteriority of our language can lead us towards skepticism and the consequences of embracing that path. Before turning explicitly to skepticism though, it's worth working through the concept of the performative utterance that Barthes (following Benveniste) found so compelling as it will make the felicity of this conversation clear.

In 1966, Barthes reviewed Benveniste's *Problems in General Linguistics* (later translated as 'Why I Love Benveniste' in *The Rustle of Language*) and specifically picks out the section in which Benveniste discusses the work of J. L. Austin as 'the decisive part of the work'.[33] The essay where Benveniste encounters Austin, 'Analytic Philosophy and Language', engages with Austin's distinction between performative and constative utterances. This distinction, which Benveniste had himself started identifying in the 1958 paper

'Subjectivity in Language', concerns 'the difference between *I swear*, which is an action, and *he swears* which is nothing but a description of a fact'.[34] 'He swears' for both Benveniste and Austin is a description of a fact which we can evaluate on the basis of truth conditions; either he swore or he did not, the (constative) utterance is either true or false. The (performative) utterance 'I swear' by contrast is an action, 'the very act which pledges me, not the description of an act I am performing'.[35] Austin first articulated a version of this distinction in his 1946 paper 'Other Minds' in which, according to Guy Longworth's entry on Austin in the *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, he:

> sketches a view on which utterances of the form 'I know that such-and-such' serve a performative and not a descriptive function […] the function of 'I know' is very similar to the function of 'I promise': both serve as ways of giving one's word, the first (typically) about how things are, the second (typically) about how one intends them to be.[36]

Over the proceeding fifteen years, Austin extended this distinction between the performative and constative into a theory of 'locutions […] stretches of language possessing sense and reference' including but not limited to locutionary, illocutionary, and perlocutionary acts.[37] A locutionary act is related to the prior concept of the constative; the content of the speech act is 'to be judged [in its] truth or falsity'.[38] The illocutionary act is similarly related to the prior concept of the performative, where it cannot be judged on truth conditions because it is not a description of a fact or state of affairs. Instead, illocutions succeed or fail in discourse based on the condition of felicity (sometimes rendered as happiness). When I utter the phrase 'I promise' I have performed the illocutionary act of promising which has certain conventions preceding it and obligations following it. If those conventions or obligations fail to obtain, then the utterance becomes infelicitous and the action fails. Illocutionary acts, like performative utterances before them, are peculiar in that there are a whole host of verbs that when uttered in the first person simply are the performing of that illocution (e.g., saying 'I promise' is to promise). Perlocutionary acts are the slipperiest category because they refer to the 'consequential effects upon the feelings, thoughts, or actions of the audience'.[39] Perlocutions have no predictable or enforceable conditions for their use and never take the form of the first person instance of their

accompanying verb (e.g., saying 'I persuade you' does not perform the function of persuading you; in fact it likely impedes it).

Nancy Bauer, who continues to advocate for the radicality of Austin's achievement, describes how analytic philosophy has generally taken up Austin's theory of speech acts in a limited way, only to 'enliven, enrich, or expand what philosophers call the enterprise of "pragmatics"'.[40] However, Bauer argues that Austin's project was much more capacious and ambitious than adding a new dimension to the extant analytic picture of language. Rather:

> It was to destroy the picture of language on which engaging in this enterprise makes good philosophical sense. 'Illocutionary force', on my understanding of Austin, is not a fancy name for an aspect of pragmatics. To the contrary, Austin's term points to a dimension of our sentences apart from which they not only would not *do* anything but also would not *mean* anything, except, perhaps, in seriously impoverished ways. That is, they would not mean what we, as people who need and want to do various things with our words, need and want them to mean. [Austin's book] *How to Do Things with Words*, on my reading, shows us that our being able to mean things with our words is a *function* of our being able to do things with them, so that attempting to put aside the 'pragmatics' of language, even just—indeed, especially—at the outset of our philosophical work is bound to issue in massive failure.[41]

Bauer here is pointing to how removing illocutionary force, removing the fact that we do things (we act) with words, impoverishes our philosophical conception of what language is and how it functions in human life. Avner Baz, another advocate for OLP, articulates the importance of illocutionary force as 'the understanding of words in everyday discourse is a matter of seeing through their [literal] meaning, as it were, to their point'.[42] This reading of OLP shows how capacious Austin's identification of illocutionary force is. The distinction between constative and performative utterances could leave the former category in the domain of the traditional conception of language as a collection of sentences which are primarily evaluated in terms of truth and falsity. The impulse of Ordinary Language Philosophy more broadly to turn to the actual use of words in ordinary discourse shows how even in the case of 'he swears' we are never just dealing with a contextless sentence describing a

fact in the world. It may be a description, but what point am I making in offering it? I could be saying it sarcastically as in 'He swears … (but I don't really believe him)' or emphatically as in 'He swears! (and I believe him)'. Bauer and Baz, following Cavell, are pointing to how words in conversation never just operate in a locutionary fashion; words in ordinary discourse are meant to do something, they have a point, and that point is their meaning more than the literal meanings of the words that make up the sentence.[43] In other words, language is a form of human action and its nature as action precedes its locutionary or purely semantic functions which the analytic philosophy of language has devoted most of its energies to unpacking.[44]

What follows from this understanding of language when taken outside the investigation of a given word or phrase is a picture of language remarkably similar to the one Barthes' articulated above. As Richard Fleming writes in *First Word Philosophy*, 'The questions of "Which words are my words?" and "How is it possible to do what I do with words?" unavoidably arise' in this picture of language.[45] Our language, the conventions governing the use of our words and the performing of actions with them (illocutionary force), not to mention the possible effects that our words might have on a prospective listener (perlocutionary force), are all beyond and behind me; they existed before me and will continue to exist in my absence. Fleming, sounding positively Barthesian, says this loss of control over our words 'threatens a loss of self and madness'.[46] Fleming here is following from Stanley Cavell's career-spanning confrontation between Ordinary Language Philosophy and the threat of skepticism that, he argues, has hovered over Western philosophy since its inception. One way to put Cavell's insight concerning skepticism here is that the anteriority of language puts us in the position of Descartes immediately before he finds certainty in 'I think therefore I am'.

To recall, very briefly, Descartes' *Meditations,* he proceeds through a series of stages of skepticism, doubting the things he thinks he knows trying to find a ground for absolute certainty of knowledge. Moving first to doubt all of his received opinions and ideas, leaving him only with sense impressions, he then postulates that an evil demon could be providing those sense impressions to deceive him and thus they are also not trustworthy. This leads Descartes to doubt absolutely everything, leaving him with only the fact that he is doubting which itself cannot be doubted. Doubting is a kind of thinking and therefore, 'I am, I exist.'[47]

Comparably in the problem of the anteriority of language, we are left in a position where our capacity to use words is entirely determined by factors beyond ourselves, either in the form of conventions of ordinary practice that we did not decide on or in the highly unpredictable ways that others can respond to us. As Fleming notes:

> It is this seemingly inevitable loss of control of our words that produces worry about being able to meaningfully express ourselves, generates a fear of inexpressiveness, and powerlessness to make myself known. Our failings at meaning what we say and others' questioning our meaning produce feelings of loss of connection with the world, loss of control over what our words say about the world and to others, and how others understand us and how we understand ourselves.[48]

Fleming notes, agreeing with Barthes, that the anteriority of language is frightening. As Cavell writes, 'it is a vision as simple as it is difficult, and as difficult as it is (and because it is) terrifying'.[49] The question is what to do with this terror. Barthes' answer before 'The Death of the Author' seems to be to face it head on by seeking originality in our writing so that we can communicate both what we want to be understood and that we really mean whatever that is. However, Barthes is always still writing in response to that terror, in fear of being misunderstood. As he wrote in *Critical Essays*, 'the language of others returns that message to me no less immediately decorated, burdened with an infinity of messages I do not want'.[50] And in 'The Death of the Author' he takes this vision to its apotheosis where instead of being open to the possibility of misunderstanding you deny the relevance of the other for either the act of writing or the process of reading.

Barthes' invocation of the 'performative' in 'The Death of the Author' takes on a new light with the context of both his own vision of language and that of OLP. Barthes' modern scriptor performatively 'traces a field without origin, or which, at least, has no other origin than language itself, language which ceaselessly calls into question all origins'.[51] It recognizes the anteriority of language and inscribes anyway, but not to make itself understood or to have an effect on a reader because that would be reinstating the person of the author. It does it because those are the conditions, the conventions of modern writing. But in the process of adopting this performative which satisfies conditions preceding it, Barthes makes the inscription itself into an empty

discourse. Where the earlier Barthes saw the task of responding to the terror of language's anteriority in originality, finding the variations which would express both what you want understood and that you mean it, 'The Death of the Author' adopts the scientific view on language wholesale and evacuates the possibility of a writer meaning something at all. Why?

Answering this question requires that we follow OLP's methodological insistence: Why would someone say the thing Barthes is clearly saying? At risk of being indelicate, the answer is that it is easier than the alternative. Writing like no one will read it and reading as if you are the only authority is freeing, it frees writer and reader both of the responsibility attendant to the mess we call intersubjectivity and sociality. This is why, over the course of his career, Cavell came to see the skeptical impulse in the Western philosophical tradition to not be discovered in thought but inflicted, as a skepticism that we inflict on the world by denying the existence or accessibility of other minds. Skepticism of other minds for Cavell is not what the analytic tradition has proffered it as. Traditionally, to be skeptical of other minds is either to be skeptical about the epistemological accessibility of the experiences or thoughts of any person that is not yourself or to be skeptical about whether others who appear to be persons are actually persons (and thus worthy of the moral consideration you expect for yourself). Cavell disputes this way of putting the problem because, for him, it misses the motivation for why someone would come to question the mental substance of another person in the first place. This is Ordinary Language Philosophy in practice. A typical instance of a question that prompts or expresses skepticism of other minds in the analytic tradition would be 'can I know your pain?' or 'how do I know that your pain is real?' Cavell asks why someone might ask this question in ordinary discourse and finds in the second variation a clue to point our investigation forward. If I am unsure if the pain you are expressing to me is a real pain, there is likely a reason for me to be unsure because in most circumstances we take another's expression of pain as given and simply rush to attend to them. If I am unsure about your expression of pain it is because I am worried you are deceiving me. Again, we find ourselves with Descartes, only now it is with his worry about the evil demon's deception.

Cavell continues exploring this worry about deception by finding a peculiar duality in our fear of inexpressiveness: 'underlying the wish to deny the publicness of language, turns out, so far, to be a fantasy, or fear, either of inexpressiveness, one in which I am not merely unknown, but in which I am

powerless to make myself known; *or one in which what I express is beyond my control*'.[52] Throughout this article's engagement with Barthes, the fear of being misunderstood was generally taken to mean a fear of being seen otherwise than how you are, that one's sympathy will not be legible, will be mistaken for disinterest: that I was ultimately inexpressive. Cavell's articulation here though highlights that inexpressiveness is only one terrifying option and that it might not actually be terrifying. The other is that what I express is beyond my control, that someone may see something about me that I did not want to show, perhaps that the originality of one's written expression of sympathy accurately conveys a disinterest that you would have rather kept hidden—what Cavell calls elsewhere our 'unconditioned exposure'.[53] Cavell here is pointing to how the fear of inexpressiveness could also be configured as a 'fantasy of necessary inexpressiveness' and that such a fantasy actually has some appealing features:

> It would relieve me of the responsibility for making myself known to others—as though if I were expressive that would mean continuously betraying my experiences, incessantly giving myself away; it would suggest that my responsibility for self-knowledge takes care of itself—as though the fact that others cannot know my (inner life) means that I cannot fail to. It would reassure my fears of being known, though it may not prevent my being under indictment.[54]

Cavell here flips the question of expressiveness on its head to show how, with a change of perspective, inexpressiveness could free us of the weight of responsibility for our words, ostensibly give us self-transparency, and confirm that no one could ever really know us in ways that might make us uncomfortable.

Why does 'The Death of the Author' evacuate the possibility of authorial meaning? Because it's easier that way. Because in writing something, anything, the exact function that makes your expression harder to communicate, which both Barthes and OLP agree is a necessary function of language, also makes your responsibility for it dramatically easier to ignore. What Barthes says about his language returning to him burdened with meanings he does not want is not only a function of writing, but of speech as well. Having a person standing in front of you only makes expression easier by allowing for compensatory context (tone of voice, facial expression, etc.)

and immediacy of clarificatory response. Writing simply removes means by which you might clarify a misunderstanding, but that removal is also a removal of the presence of someone who can judge you.[55] It is easier to write something down when you do not consider yourself responsible for the writing. Maybe no one will ever try to hold you responsible for it; that's what makes the responsibility so easy to ignore. But there's something of a phonocentrism haunting Barthes' picture in 'The Death of the Author'—identifying speech as presence and thus closer to truth while writing is somehow deceptive—and the inscription of the Austinian performative comes back to taint speech's priority in this arrangement.[56] The anteriority of language can lead you to recognize the intense responsibility you have for your words or it can lead you to the skeptical conclusion, the nihilistic conclusion, that conceiving of yourself as expressing something that matters is cringe-inducing and overly serious and not allowing the fun of the free play of signification to rein. The problem is, the free play of signification is what put us in this situation in the first place and is the source of our responsibility not our escape hatch from it.

A friend lost someone he loved, and I want to express my sympathy. I decide to write him a letter. The world is anterior to me, as is my language, and I play with the words that come to mind and none of them fit. But it matters that I get this right. It matters that my friend understand how I care for him. I can't be with him right now, and so words will have to do even though, were I in his presence I wouldn't need to say a thing to express this sympathy. Adding words makes it harder, but in our distance it might even mean more. And so I will play with these words, with the incredible variation of symbol and synonym and metaphor that language contains, until the weight I am feeling is substantialized in the form of my words. Your difference from me, your language's difference from mine, means I have to acknowledge you, take you into active consideration, not simply rely on whatever self-transparency illuminates my solitude. Or, I can erase myself and you from the equation entirely. Become a hand tracing a field without origin and you a reader without biography, psychology, or history. But then, I wouldn't be writing to express my sympathy. To evacuate expression from art would be just as transformative and destructive as it is to the letter of sympathy. It would no longer be art.[57] Evacuating my expressiveness or inflicting a skeptical denial of your expressiveness because that makes things easier for me makes me, in Cavell's words, 'lethal, not a murderer of the world exactly, but the dealer of

those small deaths of everyday slights, stuttered hesitations of acknowledgement, studied reductions or misdirections of gratitude, that kill intimacy and maim social existence'.[58] We still have the drama of Barthes' picture, only now it maintains responsibility rather than obviates it.

## Conclusion

The problem with 'The Death of the Author' is not the general picture of language's anteriority. Ordinary Language Philosophy and Roland Barthes have remarkably similar pictures of language and sociality and both find their way to asking skeptical questions, to fearing skeptical fears. All that differentiates them is how they choose to deal with that skepticism. 'The Death of the Author' seems to show Barthes choosing the easier way, and Barthes' works following it seem to vindicate that there was something insincere (or at least incomplete) in taking the easier path. For instance, in *The Pleasure of the Text* he writes about how his desire for the author returns. Or later, shortly before he passed, in *Camera Lucida* he describes but does not show the famous Winter Garden Photograph. In each case he returns from the brink of inexpressiveness in 'The Death of the Author' to the fundamental sociality of language he fervently defended before it. The example of *Camera Lucida* is particularly instructive here as he does not show the photograph he describes as if he does not trust us to see it, but describes it for us as if he trusts us to understand why that matters. Ordinary Language Philosophy on the other hand, at least as articulated by Cavell, sees the same skeptical questions and fears and, instead of accepting the skeptical conclusion, chooses to accept[59] the responsibility for our words even as they remain anterior, beyond our control.[60]

In conclusion, I do not see invoking this conversation between Roland Barthes and Ordinary Language Philosophy as a means of knocking Barthes down. The methodological and hermeneutical choices I made along the way here have been an effort to show why the humanities should linger longer with Barthes' polemic and understand why it has been taken up uncritically, out of context, for over half a century at this point. The secondary literature on 'The Death of the Author' has, at least so far as my research has shown, never noted this connection first to Benveniste and then back to Austin, nor other lines of

intellectual history that can inform our understanding of Barthes' polemic. The same is true of much of the writing on canonical texts in humanistic aesthetics and one of my hopes in pursuing this work is to demonstrate not just the utility of authorship study when it comes to art, but also for how we read those we inherit from. In other words, the value of both authorship study and ordinary language methods points me toward a citational ethics that values scholarship not merely as a constative accumulation of knowledge and truth, but as the illocutionary performative work of human lives as they are lived and meant.

## Notes

[1] Seán Burke, *The Death and Return of the Author: Criticism and Subjectivity in Barthes, Foucault and Derrida,* 3rd edn (Edinburgh University Press, 2008).
[2] Burke, *The Death and Return of the Author*, pp. 24–29. It is worth noting that Burke is being unfair particularly on the point of the Author-God. We can find in M. H. Abrams' *The Mirror and the Lamp* a long tradition in romantic criticism of treating the author with deific significance, where the author's authority is precisely grounded on God's authority, benevolence, and inspiration.
[3] Roland Barthes, 'Why I Love Benveniste', in *The Rustle of Language*, trans. by Richard Howard (Hill & Wang, 1986), pp. 162–67 (p. 165).
[4] Richard Fleming, *First Word Philosophy: Wittgenstein-Austin-Cavell* (Bucknell University Press, 2004), p. 21.
[5] Roland Barthes, 'The Death of the Author', in *Image-Music-Text,* ed. and trans. by Stephen Heath (Hill & Wang, 1977), pp. 142–48 (p. 145).
[6] Barthes, 'The Death of the Author', p. 148.
[7] Tiphaine Samoyault, *Barthes: A Biography,* trans. by Andrew Brown (Polity Press, 2017), p. 232. Even Barthes first book, *Writing Degree Zero*, shows signs of this interest in producing a holistic understanding of the situation of writing. In that book he delineates a distinction between language (as a field of possibility for the writer), style (as the particularity of each author's thrust in writing), and writing where the mix between language and style 'becomes a total sign […] it is the relationship between creation and society'. Roland Barthes, *Writing Degree Zero,* trans. by Annette Lavers and Colin Smith (Hill & Wang, 1970), p. 14.
[8] Samoyault, *Barthes: A Biography*, p. 236.
[9] Barthes, *Critical Essays*, trans. by Richard Howard (Northwestern University Press, 1972), p. xv.
[10] Barthes, *Critical Essays,* p. xi.
[11] Barthes, *Critical Essays,* p. xviii.
[12] Barthes, *Criticism and Truth*, trans. by Katrine Pilcher Keuneman (Athlone, 1987), p. 73.
[13] Barthes, *Criticism and Truth,* p. 74.
[14] Barthes, *Criticism and Truth,* p. 75.
[15] Barthes, *Criticism and Truth,* p. 76.
[16] Barthes, *Criticism and Truth,* p. 79.
[17] Barthes, *Criticism and Truth*, p. 90.
[18] Barthes, *Criticism and Truth,* p. 89.
[19] Barthes, *Critical Essays*, p. xiv.
[20] Barthes, *Critical Essays,* p. xiv.
[21] Barthes, *Critical Essays,* p. xv.

[22] Barthes, *Critical Essays,* p. xv.
[23] Barthes, *Critical Essays,* p. xv.
[24] Barthes, *Critical Essays*, pp. xiv–xviii.
[25] Barthes, *Critical Essays,* p. xviii.
[26] Barthes, 'The Death of the Author', p. 145.
[27] Barthes, 'The Death of the Author', p. 146.
[28] Barthes, 'The Death of the Author', pp. 143, 146, 147.
[29] Barthes, 'The Death of the Author', p. 145. It is worth noting here recent archival work by Claudia Amigo Pino on Barthes' unpublished seminars from the École Pratique des Hautes Etudes/École des Hautes Etudes en Sciences Sociales (1964-1977). In an essay at *Barthes Studies,* Amigo Pino refers to seminars held in 1966-67 where Barthes 'once again uses what he calls 'the linguistics of discourse', which borrows elements from Benveniste, Jakobson, and, in this seminar in particular, Austin and Searle's work on performative discourse'. These unpublished seminars are held at the Bibliothèque nationale de France and are worth further study. Claudia Amigo Pino, 'The Rhetorical Mission: Barthes' Seminars from 1964 to 1969', trans. by Sam Ferguson, *Barthes Studies,* 5 (2019), pp. 53–71 (p. 64).
[30] A.P. Martinich, 'Ordinary Language Philosophy', *Routledge Encyclopedia of Philosophy,* Taylor and Francis: https://www.rep.routledge.com/articles/thematic/ordinary-language-philosophy/v-1/sections/the-justification-of-the-method [accessed 11 February 2024].
[31] Geoffrey Warnock, 'Ordinary Language Philosophy, School of' , *Routledge Encyclopedia of Philosophy,* Taylor and Francis: https://www.rep.routledge.com/articles/thematic/ordinary-language-philosophy-school-of/v-1 [accessed 11 February 2024].
[32] Lynd Forguson narrates the decline of OLP through a number of factors including the death of J. L. Austin in 1960 at the age of 49, the departure of many of its proponents from Oxford to schools in the U.S., the rising popularity of a 'more formal, systematic analytic philosophy' from the U.S., and the return of Austin's philosophical rival A. J. Ayer to Oxford in 1959 (quoting Ayer as saying 'I wanted to provide some local opposition to the form of linguistic philosophy which Austin had made fashionable.') Certain strains of OLP maintained continued relevance in the analytic tradition following this, for instance in the work of John Searle on speech act theory (elaborating on Austin's concept of the illocutionary act). Lynd Forguson, 'Oxford and the "Epidemic" of Ordinary Language Philosophy', *The Monist*, 84.2 (2001), pp. 339–42. J.D. Porter and Nat Hansen offer a slightly different history of the after-life of OLP in 'A Quantitative History of Ordinary Language Philosophy', *Synthese* 201.225 (2023): https://doi.org/10.1007/s11229-023-04187-2 [accessed 11 February 2024].
[33] Barthes, *The Rustle of Language*, p. 163.

[34] Emile Benveniste, *Problems in General Linguistics,* trans. by Mary Elizabeth Meek (University of Miami Press, 1971), p. 234.
[35] Benveniste, *Problems*, p. 229.
[36] Guy Longworth, 'John Langshaw Austin', *The Standford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*: https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/austin-jl/ [accessed 11 February 2024].
[37] Nancy Bauer, *How to do Things with Pornography* (Harvard University Press, 2015), p. 87.
[38] Bauer, *How to do Things with Pornography*, p. 93.
[39] J. L. Austin, *How to do Things with Words* (Clarendon Press, 1962), p. 101.
[40] Bauer, *How to do Things with Pornography*, p. 88.
[41] Bauer, *How to do Things with Pornography,* p. 88.
[42] Avner Baz, *When Words Are Called For* (Harvard University Press, 2012), p. 189.
[43] This reading of Austin can also be found in Sandy Petrey's *Speech Acts and Literary Theory* (Routledge, 1990) and Shoshana Felman's *The Literary Speech Act: Don Juan with J.L. Austin, or Seduction in Two Languages* (Cornell University Press, 1983). I cite Bauer, Baz, and Cavell here rather than Petrey and Felman because of how the word 'meaning' is used. Felman and Petrey use 'meaning' to refer to the constative and 'force' to refer to the performative. Bauer, Baz, and Cavell refuse this division rhetorically. The quote from Baz above is particularly helpful in this regard as his use of 'meaning' therein is sarcastic—the point we look past the literal meaning to see is the actual meaning of the utterance, making his prior use of 'meaning' seem like something entirely other than meaning at all.
[44] There is a sense in which this account of language also lines up with that articulated in the work of Robert Brandom—that language use has a 'downtown' contra Wittgenstein and that that 'downtown' is the giving and asking for reasons. Meanwhile, the OLP tradition would count a much larger number of actions as part of illocutionary force, giving and asking for reasons are certainly examples of it.
[45] Fleming, *First Word Philosophy*, p. 26. Continuing from note 43, Petrey and Felman see Austin's vision of language as fundamentally distinct from Benveniste's which they assimilate to the vision of language that Austin was challenging in the analytic tradition. As shown in this paragraph I think this is a mistake. While Benveniste does not want to follow Austin down the path of illocutionary force and felicity conditions, his view of language forces the same skeptical questions about our relationship to language as the OLP view does.
[46] Fleming, *First Word Philosophy,* p. 27.
[47] René Descartes, *Meditations on First Philosophy,* trans. by Michael Moriarty (Oxford University Press, 2008), p. 18.
[48] Fleming, *First Word Philosophy,* p. 28.
[49] Stanley Cavell, *Must We Mean What We Say?* (Cambridge University Press, 1976), p. 52.

[50] Barthes, *Critical Essays,* p. xv.
[51] Barthes, 'The Death of the Author'*,* p. 146.
[52] Stanley Cavell, *The Claim of Reason: Wittgenstein, Skepticism, Morality, and Tragedy* (Oxford University Press, 1979), p. 351.
[53] Stanley Cavell, *Contesting Tears: The Hollywood Melodrama of the Unknown Woman* (University of Chicago Press, 1996), p. 43.
[54] Cavell, *The Claim of Reason*, p. 351.
[55] The phenomenon of the anonymous internet user should demonstrate the empirical reality of this statement.
[56] I point to phonocentrism here as a way of pointing to Derrida who also has a place in this intellectual history. Barthes initially published 'The Death of the Author' in the American art magazine *Aspen* in the fall of 1967. A year earlier he was also present in Baltimore, Maryland for the conference where Derrida delivered his essay 'Structure, Sign, and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences' in October of 1966. If I were more comfortable speculating on this basis alone I would say that this event was decisive for the shift between Barthes' version of skepticism towards authorship in *Criticism and Truth* and that which appears in 'The Death of the Author'. The influence, while speculative, feels undeniable when one reads the texts side by side. Richard Macksey's opening remarks at the conference are also worthy of note here, particularly for their reference to not only Austin, but Cavell in a footnote; Richard Macksey, 'Lions and Squares: Opening Remarks', in *The Structuralist Controversy: The Languages of Criticism and the Sciences of Man,* ed. by Richard Macksey and Eugenio Donato (Johns Hopkins University Press, 1972), pp. 1–14 (pp. 10–12). It is also worth noting that Derrida takes his own spin on these issues later in *Monolingualism of the Other; or, the Prosthesis of Origin*, trans. by Patrick Mensah (Stanford University Press, 1998) where the 'inalienable alienation' of my language being the only one I have while it being in no other sense mine is, 'the origin of our responsibility' (p. 25). He also gives what appear to the Cavellian ordinary language philosopher some wonderful definitions of illocution: 'An immanent structure of promise or desire, an expectation without a horizon of expectation [that] informs all speech' (p. 21); 'the address to the other, it gives its word, or rather it gives the possibility of giving its word' (p. 22).
[57] And lest the anonymous internet user get off scot-free in this, recall Bauer's point about the capaciousness of illocutionary force. The anonymous Twitter user might think they aren't responsible for their words, but that doesn't mean they actually aren't. Even infelicitous illocutionary acts have illocutionary force
[58] Stanley Cavell, 'Responses', in *Contending with Stanley Cavell*, ed. by Russell B. Goodman, (Oxford University Press, 2005), pp. 157–76 (p. 159).
[59] See Avner Baz, 'Stanley Cavell's Argument of the Ordinary', in *Nordic Wittgenstein Review*, 7.2 (2018), pp. 9–48: '"We understandably do not like our concepts to be

based on what matters to us […] [for that seems to imply] my being responsible for whatever stability our criteria may have, and I do not want this responsibility". That does not mean, however, that we couldn't come to accept, even embrace, that responsibility' (p. 19) Baz's article performs a beautiful reading of Cavell's critique of Paul Kripke from *Conditions Handsome and Unhandsome.*

[60] What relevance does this have for interpretation? To put it schematically, one needs to get the point of the human utterance before doing forms of deconstructive work or reading against the grain. The reason for this could be configured in a number of ways. On simple pragmatic grounds one should want to get at the point of the utterance as part of interpretation so as to not be wrong—to not lie. That though is the less interesting reason. The more interesting reason is that when performing an interpretation of a human utterance, you and the utterer are not the only people in the room. You become the utterer of the interpretive act and people who like the utterer or their work might read your interpretation and bristle at or find unintelligible your reading if you don't show that you understand the point being made by the utterance you are interpreting. This is consequently a moral claim about the role of authorship in interpretation—that the pragmatics of wanting to be understood are licensed by the desire to be understood and the moral imperative which follows to try to understand.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Mynt Marsellus is a doctoral candidate at the Cinema Studies Institute at the University of Toronto. Their dissertation project argues for a new approach to authorship in cinema studies by staging an encounter between recent work in film philosophy, particularly concerning the works of Stanley Cavell, and classical auteurist writings.

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