Roland Barthes, “The Death of the Author”

RB starts with a BANG: “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]

RB then offers a specious and rather complex theory of how and why the idea of ‘authorship’ came to be attached automatically to any written work of art, and the authorial *entity* seen to be *entailed* by the work itself.

JP: Notice that here RB diverges from Livingston’s approach to fictional art. He has a theory of history of ideas that *explains away* what he regards as a *mistaken* connection between a story told by way of literary devices and the model of communication between a speaker and an audience that anchors the commonsense (in ***our era only*** RB takes pains to point out!) view of the language of literary fiction.

JP: It’s hard to tell whether this is an argument among literary theorists that only has tangential relations to the philosophical question: do *stories* entail *storytellers?*

JP: When RB says he prefers to think that it is **language itself** that is speaking, not an **author**, he sounds **too precious for words**. In the actual world, this can only be some kind of, admittedly **literary**, **conceit**! There **are no languages without speakers and listeners!** (At least, that is what the commonsense realist would say….what supports the idealist position of RB? ….Stay Tuned!).

JP: Can RB’s desire to get rid of the speaker be managed as itself ***a literary device*** without making it necessary to ***give up the idea that every work of literary fiction that is the product of a single MAKER*** (to revert to Livingston’s distinction between ‘makers’ and ‘authors’)? I think so.

JP: This is Platonism on the status of language itself (and no less implausible for the invention of a transcendental ontology grounded in disembodied linguistic ***voices***).

In one respect RB seems right: the *book* and the *author* are not the same, and you cannot *recover the book* simply by delving deeply into the *mind of its author*. But that doesn’t disconnect the act of *communication* from the need for someone *doing the communicating*. It just shows that communication can included voices-within-voices-within-voices.

It does seem that a speaker **can** ‘bury the author’ in virtue of the **way they articulate** (in part by **assuming the voice of another**). But all this is due to *imagination,* and not to some Platonist disembodied entity LANGUAGE that is speaking without there being a speaker!

RB finally reveals his actual beef: “Once the Author is removed, the claim to decipher the text becomes quite futile. To give a text an Author is to impose a limit on that text, to furnish it with a final signified, to close the writing.” [p. 147]

JP: But this is just to imagine that some of the freedoms that come with imaginative writing cannot be preserved without KILLING THE AUTHOR. But I think that is a mistake. You can preserve that freedom from the stupid idea that there is only one correct interpretation of a text and that interpretation is grounded in the intentions of the author/speaker. You just indicate that sometimes/ofttimes an author is PLAYING AROUND IN WORDS and making discoveries or simply engaging in experiments, with no particular INTENTION in mind.For this reason, I think RB’s whole groundwork supporting the ‘death of the author’ is really just a diatribe against those critical theorists who try to *mine the depths of a text looking for the authors soul.* But we can avoid that without going so far as to propose that language *is an ontological entity unto itself.*