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The Dead Author and the Living Body. Roland Barthes' Sanatorium Treatment and His Theory of Authorship

Abstract: The purpose of my paper is to demonstrate that the theory of the “death of the author” formulated by Roland Barthes in the late 1960s can be read in the context of the sanatorium treatment he underwent between 1942 and 1946, since the experience of tuberculosis was inscribed in two unpublished drafts Barthes wrote after leaving the sanatorium, namely *Esquisse d'une société sanatoriale* [*Sketch of a Sanatorium Society*] and *L'Avenir de la rhétorique* [*The Future of Rhetoric*]. By pointing out the similarities between *The Future of Rhetoric* and *The Death of the Author*, I seek to prove that some of Barthes' concepts, hitherto seen as inspired by structuralist ideas, appeared in his writings much earlier. An additional consideration is given to the use of metaphors that clearly links the 1946 and 1947 texts to the 1967 *The Death of the Author*.

Keywords: Roland Barthes, theory of authorship, literary theory, sanatorium treatment, tuberculosis

In *The Luxury of Poor* [*Le Luxe des pauvres*], French author Jean Rousselot describes his experience of being trapped in a state of existential limbo, of being stuck somewhere between life and non-existence – a feeling caused by his stay at Saint-Hilaire-du-Touvet, one of the many sanatoriums that, at the end of the 19th and beginning of the 20th century, were designed for the treatment of tuberculosis. A passage from Rousselot's book sheds light on how patients suffering from this illness, forced to be isolated from the outside world, understood the ambivalence of their new position:

The snow seems to have settled for eternity on us, as on all things. Our roots are stretched out, wrapped in the warmth of this infinite blanket, but where are our branches, our leaves? Where are the sharp edges that once clung to the human world? We are no longer of this world, nor of any other; we are no longer of today, nor of yesterday;

we neither regret nor hope for anything: we simply are... [...] the bird itself no longer knows if it has ever flown or sung...¹

Emotional uprooting, inertia, a sense of time irretrievably lost – all these sentiments are typical of patients undergoing sanatorium treatment at a time when tuberculosis could not be cured by antibiotics. Similar to a bird that has forgotten that it could once fly and sing, the sick, confined to a medical center, begin to forget what active participation in the events of life looked like.

Tiphaine Samoyault gives the above-quoted excerpt from Rousselot's book in her biography of Roland Barthes² as an example of a written account depicting the state of being cut out of the normal course of history experienced by the residents of Saint-Hilaire-du-Touvet. Barthes, himself badly affected by tuberculosis, spent there almost four years, for he was hospitalized at Saint-Hilaire-du-Touvet between 1942 and 1946 (with short intervals taken to go to Leysin, another sanatorium in Switzerland, and to the aftercare center for tuberculosis patients in Paris).³

Barthes' experience of sanatorium treatment, as well as the repercussions it had on his further life and his writings, has already been largely discussed, not only by Samoyault, but also by Philippe Roger (1986)⁴, Martin McQuillan (2011)⁵, Marie Gil (2012)⁶, or Andy Stafford (2015)⁷, to name but a few. However, the impact that staying at Saint-Hilaire-du-Touvet could potentially have had on one of Barthes' more famous ideas, namely the notion of the death of the author, is still to be addressed. The purpose of this paper is to examine how a text that Barthes wrote at the end of his treatment (namely the unpublished article *The Future of Rhetoric* [*L'avenir de la rhétorique*]) anticipates the main themes that appear in *The Death of the Author* [*La mort de l'auteur*], 20 years later. By bringing these two texts together, I seek to prove that Barthes not only had a certain vision of authorship in his mind long before devoting himself to structuralist inquiries but also that this view stemmed directly from his experience of illness and, in particular, the treatment he underwent.

¹ J. Rousselot, *Le Luxe des pauvres*, Paris 1956, p. 151. Unless otherwise noted, all translations from French were done by me. In the footnotes, I provide the source text – N.G. Original text: “La neige semble s'être posée pour l'éternité sur nous comme sur toutes choses. Nos racines s'allongent, au chaud sous ce drap infini, mais où sont nos branches, nos feuilles ? Où sont les aspérités qui nous accrochaient encore au monde des hommes ? Nous ne sommes plus d'ici, ni d'ailleurs ; nous ne sommes plus d'aujourd'hui, ni d'hier ; nous ne regrettons ni n'espérons rien : nous sommes... [...] L'oiseau lui-même ne sait plus s'il a jamais vole, jamais chanté...”

² T. Samoyault, *Roland Barthes. Biographie*, Paris 2015, p. 178.

³ Ibidem, pp. 172–174.

⁴ P. Roger, *Roland Barthes, roman*, Paris 1986.

⁵ M. McQuillan, *Roland Barthes*, London 2011.

⁶ M. Gil, *Roland Barthes. Au lieu de la vie*, Paris 2012.

⁷ A. Stafford, *Roland Barthes*, London 2015.

“Providentially significant drama” – between illness and destiny

In a letter addressed to his close friend, Philippe Rebeyrol, Barthes describes the experience of a specific seclusion that accompanied his time in the sanatorium:

Here, the state of perfect happiness is the state of perfect availability. Inner memories must be abolished, those habits of the soul that form the continuity of a being. Every point of comparison must be suppressed between the past—house, mother, friends, Paris streets, the living world where everything is possible—and the present—those beings with whom one is going to live for a long time, bound to them only through a disease that moreover varies widely in its intensity and subtleties—the present, with accordions in the bedrooms and exuberant moments of warm camaraderie.⁸

Patients sent to sanatorium are suddenly forced to change their habits not only on the external level (since the schedule imposed by the institution now regulates their occupations and activities). They are compelled, above all, to make a kind of rearrangement of their inner life, they have to cut off their thoughts from the previous existence they needed to abandon. No possible link can unite the memory of the past and the experience of the present. As Susan Sontag (personally Barthes' friend) points out that when it comes to the tuberculosis treatment: “Once put away, the patient enters a duplicate world with special rules.”⁹ Living at Saint-Hilaire-du-Touvet required Barthes to adapt to functioning in a community quite different from his Parisian environment. On top of that, Samoyault argues that Barthes' situation was further complicated by the fact that his stay at the sanatorium occurred during the Nazi occupation of France during World War II.¹⁰ Thus, formal obstacles allowed him only very scarce, if constant, contact with those closest to him – his mother, his brother, Michel Salzedo, and Philippe Rebeyrol.

⁸ R. Barthes, *Letter to Philippe Rebeyrol, Saint-Hilaire, Thursday, March 26, 1942*, in: idem, *Album. Unpublished Correspondence and Texts*, transl. J. Gladding, New York 2018, p. 18. Original text: “L'état de parfait bonheur, c'est ici l'état de parfaite disponibilité. Il faut abolir les souvenirs internes, ces manies de l'âme qui font la continuité d'un être. Il faut supprimer tout point de comparaison entre le passé – celui de la maison, de la mère, des amis, des rues parisiennes, du monde vivant où tout est possible – et le présent – celui de ces êtres avec qui on va vivre longtemps sans d'autres liens avec eux que celui d'une maladie de nuances et d'intensité d'ailleurs très diverses –, le présent des accordéons dans les chambres et des moments exubérants de la chaude camaraderie.” (R. Barthes, *Letter à Philippe Rebeyrol, Saint-Hilaire, Jeudi, Mars 26, 1942*, in: idem, *Album. Inédits, correspondances et varia*, Paris 2015, p. 43).

⁹ S. Sontag, *Illness as Metaphor and AIDS and Its Metaphors*, New York–London–Toronto 1990, p. 36.

¹⁰ T. Samoyault, op. cit., p. 176.

The above observations are intended to shed light on the context in which Barthes wrote two seemingly very different texts. The first one, *Sketch of a Sanatorium Society* [*Esquisse d'une société sanatoriale*] is concerned with the peculiar character of relationships one can establish in such a place as a sanatorium. Here, Barthes suggests that the sanatorium society might be defined as “puerile”¹¹, since the patients, relegated to the position of “children”, are entirely dependent on medical doctors, fulfilling the role of paternal figures. He goes as far as to compare physicians to some sort of deities whose attribute is to, at the same time, condemn and absolve a sinner.¹² Similarly, sanatorium doctors diagnose patients (thus condemning them to their diseases) and offer them “absolution” through treatment, giving them hope that they might be cured. The observation of this phenomenon leads Barthes to the following conclusion about humanity: “Between nature and man, there must be a living, conscious, omniscient element that, despite oneself, one must take for omnipotent”.¹³ This opinion is echoed by another remark, coming from the closing parts of the essay, where Barthes says that sanatorium patients urgently need to see their experience of illness as an element of some greater design, an inevitable step on the path towards their final destiny:

That is because sanatorium society develops more as a community than as a true society. Its members find it enormously helpful to view their time here within a teleological order and not simply a causal one. There is a constant shift from the contingent to transcendent, and interested parties endlessly disguise what is very difficult—because very useless—as providential and finally beneficial. Thus meditation, which may—or may not—result from idleness, is usually presented as the mystical meeting of suffering and truth and not as the conditional result of disease, as a revelation and not as a contingent operation.¹⁴

¹¹ R. Barthes, *Sketch of a Sanatorium Society*, in: idem, *Album. Unpublished Correspondence and Texts*, op. cit., p. 64. Original text: “puérule” (R. Barthes, *Esquisse d'une société sanatoriale*, in: idem, *Album. Inédits, correspondances et varia*, op. cit., p. 87).

¹² Ibidem, p. 65.

¹³ Ibidem. Original text: “[...] Il y a, entre la nature et l'homme, un élément vivant, conscient, omniscient et que l'on doit prendre, malgré qu'on en ait, pour omnipotent [...]” (R. Barthes, *Esquisse d'une société sanatoriale*, op. cit., pp. 87–88).

¹⁴ Ibidem, p. 66. Original text: “C'est que la société sanatoriale se développe plutôt dans un sens communautaire que vraiment social ; ses membres trouvent un secours précieux à insérer leur séjour dans un ordre téléologique et non simplement causal. Il y a sans cesse passage du contingent au transcendant, et sans cesse les intéressés déguisent ce qui est très dur – parce que très inutile – en providentiel et finalement bienfaisant. Ainsi, la méditation qui peut, ou non, résulter de l'oisiveté est ordinairement présentée comme la rencontre mystique de la souffrance et de la vérité et non comme le produit conditionnel de la maladie, comme une révélation et non comme une opération contingente [...]” (R. Barthes, *Esquisse d'une société sanatoriale*, op. cit., p. 89).

The need to give meaning to their suffering and, even more, to the condition of exile that they all share, pushes sanatorium patients to look for patterns and signs that would allow them to transform (or transcend) a pure sequence of coincidences that make for their lives into destiny endowed with some secret truth. The latter might be discovered through the particular treatment prescribed by the godly figures of doctors as it was pointed out above.

These comments will prove to be extremely relevant once we compare Barthes' text on sanatorium societies with an article he wrote shortly after completing his treatment – namely, *The Future of Rhetoric* (1946). Upon reading this essay, it becomes evident that the remarks about the functioning of the sanatorium environment, particularly the teleological orientation of patients seeking meaning in their existence, are surprisingly akin to the observations Barthes made at a similar time in the context of a literary critic's work. In his view, a certain type of historically motivated criticism advocated by Gustave Lanson¹⁵ (predominant in France in the first half of the 20th century) was occupied with looking for a hidden truth in a given author's life that would explain and unify their writings, thus allowing for their unambiguous interpretation. The parallel between the patients' search for meaning and the critics' search for hidden truths is striking. According to Barthes:

It was after Lanson that many literary hacks began writing biographical novels, whose distinctive feature is to make a writer's works entirely dependent upon the chance events of his life, and to organize the lifetime into a providentially significant drama. Thus the highly decorative but false notion of destiny was introduced into criticism, where it serves no purpose.¹⁶

It goes without saying that the element recurring in both Barthes' texts written shortly after leaving the sanatorium is precisely the search for "providentially significant drama". However, while Barthes is somewhat empathetic in the essay about the collective life of patients under tuberculosis treatment, as he doesn't necessarily criticize them for their need to believe in "destiny", he's considerably less forgivable when it comes to the observations concerning the directions taken by literary studies. In other words, even if the "false notion of destiny" serves some

¹⁵ Gustave Lanson was one of the most prominent figures in French literary criticism at the beginning of the 20th century. His scientific method was mostly concerned with the examination of literature through historical, biographical and sociological inquiries.

¹⁶ R. Barthes, *The Future of Rhetoric*, in: idem, *Album. Unpublished Correspondence and Texts*, op. cit., p. 105. Original text: "C'est depuis Lanson que beaucoup de littérateurs se sont mis à écrire des biographies romancées, dont le propre est de faire entièrement dépendre les œuvres d'un écrivain des accidents de sa vie, et d'organiser *le temps-vécu* en un drame providentiellement significatif. Ainsi s'introduite dans la critique où elle n'aurait que faire la notion forte décorative mais fausse de destin." (R. Barthes, *L'avenir de la rhétorique*, in: idem, *Album. Inédits, correspondances et varia*, op. cit., p. 139).

purpose while used by people who are severely ill and lonely (since it gives them some hope or a sense of meaning), it has no place in scientific enterprises. What's being chastised here is the practice of seeing one's literary works as originating from private experiences – arranged in a logical sequence thanks to the concept of “destiny”. Barthes mocks this type of pseudo-scholarly approach because it limits the interpretation, leading it in one strictly defined direction:

Almost every year the lives of Racine, Pascal, Voltaire, Chateaubriand, Pushkin, Mallarmé, Péguy, etc. submit to the easy unity of the novel, and their works are reduced to the state of personal messages and secrets. No one comes close to caring about analyzing actual content, the verbal substance of the written thought.¹⁷

It is the lives of artists, not their works, that turn out to galvanize writers hungry for sensationalism. The figure of the author and of the author's – romanticized – existence calls for an interpretation that reduces the critic's role to the simple task of deciphering a message encoded in a given text. This “hidden truth” is, in turn, determined by history, by the environment (*milieu*) that a particular artist inhabited, by their friends, by their loved ones, or – in a word – by the sequence of the events of their life, which, although random, arrange themselves into a meaningful whole that gives a sense to their existence and parallelly to their works.

From *The Future of Rhetoric* to *The Death of the Author*

This point of view coincides with the idea of the death of the author problematized by Barthes some 20 years later. According to Samoyault, while it might have seemed that he challenged the realness and significance of the author itself, proving that the latter had no influence whatsoever on their literary production (which would be rather hard to defend under any circumstances), Barthes was in fact just arguing against the unifying, symbolic power that the figure of writer retains over the polysemic nature of text.¹⁸ In her groundbreaking study about the performative and avant-garde character of *The Death of the Author*, Ana Delia Rogobete draws attention to the context in which this article was first published (namely in the *Aspen* magazine, where it was accompanied by the works of artists and critics such as Samuel Beckett, Marcel Duchamp or Susan Sontag)¹⁹. She then claims

¹⁷ Ibidem, p. 105. Original text: “Chaque année ou presque, les vies de Racine, Pascal, Voltaire, Chateaubriand, Pouchkine, Mallarmé, Péguy, etc., sont courbées sous l'unité facile du roman, et leurs œuvres réduites à l'état de messages personnels et de confidences. On est loin de se soucier d'analyser le contenu concret, la substance verbale de la pensée écrite.” (R. Barthes, *L'avenir de la rhétorique*, op. cit., p. 139).

¹⁸ T. Samoyault, op. cit., p. 462.

¹⁹ A.D. Rogobete, “The Reader in a Box. Roland Barthes et la crise de l'auteur”, *MLN* 2017, vol. 132, no. 4, p. 802.

that it would be beneficial to consider *The Death of the Author* as an example of revolutionary opposition against the authoritarian and violent interpretation:

The act of guiding the meaning, or even the meanings, of a work is not an “innocent” gesture. In fact, to direct means to create, but also to stop: to stop the meaning, the interpretation, in order to impose one’s own as the most reasonable. The critic thus becomes the author’s author. He is not a mere reader, but a reader endowed with a symbolic power that enables him to impose his interpretation as the only one that is objective and valid [...].²⁰

Barthes believed that what was left behind in this sort of criticism is what should be precisely the very object of the literary analysis – namely, the language itself. In *The Future of Rhetoric*, he emphasizes this point by asking the following question:

Because what is the writer in this case? An organism that adapts through language alone, and not through action. Thus it is to the level of language that literary criticism, if it wants to be entirely historical, must attend.²¹

It should be noted that in the essay that forms the basis of Barthes’ entire theory of the death of the author, the writer is not completely removed or erased from the text. Rather, its presence is boiled down to the language layer of a text. Even though, as Jonathan Doering justifiably argues, *The Future of Rhetoric* “[...] was written in 1946, before Barthes had encountered Saussure [...]”²², it contains some elements that Barthes will consequently elaborate on during his “structuralist” phase. This question turns out to be particularly evident when Barthes writes about rhetoric devices and the course he believes literary studies should pursue:

Written thought must be reduced to an order of verbal processes, that is to say, to rhetoric. It is, in fact, to a resurrection of rhetoric that we will sooner or later be led, not, of course, as the art of persuasion through the means of formulas and formal

²⁰ Ibidem, p. 804. Original text: “Diriger le sens, les sens, même, d’une œuvre n’est pas un geste « innocent ». En effet, diriger signifie créer, mais aussi arrêter : arrêter le sens, l’interprétation pour imposer la sienne comme la plus raisonnable. Le critique devient ainsi auteur de l’auteur. Il n’est pas un simple lecteur, mais un lecteur pourvu d’un pouvoir symbolique qui lui permet d’imposer son interprétation comme la seule qui soit objective et valable [...]”.

²¹ R. Barthes, *The Future of Rhetoric*, op. cit., p. 107. Original text: “Car qu’est-ce que l’écrivain, en l’occurrence ? Un organisme qui s’adapte par le seul langage, et non par l’action. C’est donc sur le plan du langage que la critique littéraire, si elle se veut entièrement historique, doit se transporter.” (R. Barthes, *L’avenir de la rhétorique*, op. cit., p. 140).

²² J. Doering, “Review of R. Barthes *Album. Unpublished Correspondence and Texts*, trans. J. Gladding, New York 2018”, *Critical Inquiry* 2019, https://criticalinquiry.uchicago.edu/jonathan_doering_reviews_album/ [access: 30.04.2024].

classifications, but very much as the science of written language, taking into account all that experimental psychology will have to teach us about the acquisition of verbal habits, the conditioning of speech, the construction, conclusion, and use of word groups, all of which, under the name of expressions or even themes, we will learn to recognize and appreciate for their importance. From now on, criticism must be able to make certain lists, certain calculations and observations of this order. Even without first moving to the verbal level, but remaining for now on the hypothetical level of a pure mental order, we can say that criticism, oriented until now toward the problems of chronology, neglected to inquire into certain *constants* in the work of a writer. The stubborn and almost involuntary nature of a few ideas and processes, which constitute the very unity in tone and style specific to an author, must arouse suspicions.²³

Following the above guidelines, literary criticism should tackle the problem of repetition of specific linguistic forms scattered across different pieces of writing. The figure of the author – who until now was the main object of historically motivated analysis – finds itself replaced by language. It should be noted that Barthes arrives at the same conclusion some twenty years later, in *The Death of the Author*, where, while paying tribute to Mallarmé, he remarks that “[...] it is language which speaks, not the author [...]”.²⁴ What is more, these “constants”, that is, the stubborn patterns arranging texts, might be seen as those elements Barthes will one day call “structures.” Here, it becomes clear why the proclaimed “resurrection” of rhetoric never really had a chance to happen: it was cut short – in the 1960s – by the emergence of a new discipline, structuralism. In fact, although they vary in regard to names, structuralism and rhetoric, in a way that Barthes understands the latter notion, both represent quite similar approaches. For him,

²³ R. Barthes, *The Future of Rhetoric*, op. cit., p. 107. Original text: “Il faut commencer de réduire la pensée écrite à un ordre de processus verbaux, c’est-à-dire à une rhétorique. C’est en effet à une résurrection de la rhétorique que l’on sera tôt ou tard amené, non pas bien entendu comme art de la persuasion au moyen de recettes et de classifications formelles, mais bien comme science du langage écrit, compte tenu de tout ce que la psychologie expérimentale pourra nous apprendre sur l’acquisition des habitudes verbales, le conditionnement de la parole, la construction, le dénouement et l’usage de blocs de mots, dont sous le nom de formules, ou même de thèmes, on apprendra à connaître toute l’importance. Le critique doit pouvoir dès maintenant procéder à certains dénombrements, à certaines approximations et observations de cet ordre ; sans même se transporter d’abord sur le plan verbal, et en restant provisoirement dans l’hypothèse d’un ordre mental pur, on peut dire que la critique, orientée jusqu’ici vers des problèmes de chronologie, a négligé de s’interroger sur certaines *constantes* de l’œuvre d’un écrivain. Le caractère obstiné et comme involontaire de quelques idées et de quelques procédés, qui fait l’unité même du ton et la manière propre d’un auteur, doit donner l’éveil.” (R. Barthes, *L’avenir de la rhétorique*, op. cit., pp. 140–141).

²⁴ R. Barthes, *The Death of the Author*, in: idem, *Image, Music, Text*, transl. S. Heath, New York 1977, p. 143. Original text: “[...] C’est le langage qui parle, ce n’est pas l’auteur [...]” (R. Barthes, *La mort de l’auteur*, in: idem, *Le bruissement de la langue. Essais critiques IV*, Paris 1984, p. 64).

rhetoric does not mean, in this case, the classical “art of persuasion through the means of formulas and formal classifications”. Quite the contrary, it figures here as a meticulous and even statistical study of linguistic patterns. At some point in the 1946 article, Barthes advises a potential critic to count instances when a specific formula appears in a given text, and decide which linguistic tools are most important for different authors. He proceeds accordingly in his later career, when, for instance, he looks for systems of signs and repeating expressions in the language of fashion magazines (in *The Fashion System* [*Système de la mode*]).

As a result, it is tempting to see *The Future of Rhetoric* as a document that foreshadows themes present in the work of Barthes in the 1960s, at a time when he was thoroughly absorbed in his structuralist and semiotic studies. As I have tried to demonstrate this similarity is especially evident when it comes to *The Death of the Author*. Such an observation may lead to a surprising conclusion, namely that many of the views identified so far with the structuralist period in Barthes’ writing had appeared in his thoughts much earlier. It would follow, then, that it was not the influence of Ferdinand de Saussure, Algirdas Julien Greimas, or Roman Jakobson that directly led to the emergence of certain ideas in Barthes’ philosophy of literature, since these theorists merely provided good ground for the development of views that the author of *S/Z* had shared much earlier²⁵.

However, one cannot overlook the places where the two texts diverge significantly. Since the purpose of this study is to show that Barthes’ famous theory of shifting the literary analysis from the biographical into the linguistic domain was largely inspired by his experience of sanatorium treatment, the point of difference between the two articles that I would like to highlight is precisely the importance of the body.

²⁵ It is interesting to observe that it is also in *The Future of Rhetoric* that Barthes confesses his hopes to one day see a scientific endeavor, where many scholars from different fields of knowledge could work together on a single project: “Of course this detailed, often useless research, primarily involving limited observations and uncertain results, cannot be the work of a single individual. Here we must overcome the stubborn prejudice that holds literary criticism to be the individual activity par excellence. In the parascientific operation that criticism must be, collective work is imperative” (R. Barthes, *The Future of Rhetoric*, op. cit., p. 113). Original text: “Bien entendu ces recherches minutieuses, souvent inutiles, et tout d’abord d’observation étroite et de résultat incertain, ne peuvent être le travail d’un seul. Il faudrait ici dépasser le préjugé tenace selon quoi la critique littéraire est l’activité individuelle par excellence ; dans cette opération para-scientifique que doit être la critique, le travail collectif s’imposera [...]” (R. Barthes, *L’avenir de la rhétorique*, op. cit., p. 145). This exactly this type of activity that would be eventually advocated by structuralist, trying to breach the gap between linguistics, literature, and anthropology.

The language itself – body and metaphor

The question of corporality is surprisingly absent in Barthes' famous essay from the 1960s. In fact, the only fragment of *The Death of the Author* that mentions the body does that in a rather negative way:

[...] 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.²⁶

Here, the creative act consumes every element that was at its origin. Everything, including the writer's body, dissolves inside the abyss of a written text. What stays is the language itself. This problem is tackled in a completely opposite way in *The Future of Rhetoric*. In this essay, Barthes says that it is the body that forms and accounts for the uniqueness of one's language:

The text is the product of a functioning organism; indisputably, that organism is located in a given society, in which History determines our role (which still happens only very imperfectly). But it also has functions according to its own determinations, and individuation is the determination of the body, that is to say, of the biologically closed and unified being. Thus the text cannot present only a historical problem, in the mental sense of the word. There are also problems of verbal technology and kinematics for each writer, as for each human there are personal biochemical problems.²⁷

Barthes emphasizes the mechanical (or rather bio-mechanical) aspect of writing. Every utterance, every spoken or written word, is in some way or another dependent upon the confinements of the human body, its limitations, and, in psychoanalytical terms, its pulsations and drives. It is precisely for that reason that Barthes judges the historically motivated analysis (focusing only on a given writer's biography as a sequence of events organized into a meaningful story) as invalid. In another fragment of *The Future of Rhetoric*, he criticizes the approach

²⁶ R. Barthes, *The Death of the Author*, op. cit., p. 142. Original text: “[...] l'écriture est destruction de toute voix, de toute origine. L'écriture, c'est ce neutre, ce composite, cet oblique où fuit notre sujet, le noir-et-blanc où vient se perdre toute identité, à commencer par celle-là même du corps qui écrit.” (R. Barthes, *La mort de l'auteur*, op. cit., p. 63).

²⁷ R. Barthes, *The Future of Rhetoric*, op. cit., p. 111. Original text: “Le texte est le produit d'un organisme en fonctionnement ; incontestablement, cet organisme s'est situé dans une société donnée, dont c'est à l'Histoire de nous dire le rôle (ce qui n'est encore fait que très imparfaitement) ; mais il a aussi fonctionné selon ses déterminations propres, dont l'individuation est celle-là même du corps, c'est-à-dire d'un être biologiquement clos et unifié. Le texte ne peut donc poser seulement un problème historique, au sens mental du mot. Il y a aussi pour chaque écrivain des problèmes de technologie et de cinématique verbales, comme il y a pour chaque homme des problèmes bio-chimiques personnels.” (R. Barthes, *L'avenir de la rhétorique*, op. cit., p. 144).

of Lanson's acolytes because, while wanting to explain texts through the lenses of the author's life, they lost sight of the only element of the author's existence that should actually matter for the literary criticism:

By wanting to define the work through its widest and most lively context, critics neglect the work itself. It is no longer a set of concrete operations, it is an emanation, a quasi-spiritual and inessential vapor, from a single reality: the author. And that reality is rarely examined for what it, like the human body, can offer of the solidly observable; the author here is most often only the geometric location for a certain number of adventures, crises, passions, and influences.²⁸

In this fragment, Barthes' standpoint is relatively clear. He denounces critics not only for being concerned more about the author's life than the actual content of their books, but also for not taking into account the "solidly observable" reality of human existence, the one manifested by the flesh. The presence of such statements in Barthes' writings in the late 1940s should not come as a surprise when, once again, one considers that he formulates when the memory of the sanatorium is still fresh for him.

For four years of treatment, the body was Barthes' point of reference for all possible experiences, particularly when he was forced to isolate himself from other patients and to spend long hours in bed, thinking only about his medical condition. Samoyault describes a special medical procedure called *déclive* that Barthes had to undergo in 1943 when he needed to lie in bed for eighteen out of twenty-four hours with his lower limbs raised above his chest and head.²⁹ She then acknowledges that in this reclined position even reading was painful.³⁰ The only thing he needed to be concerned with was his own body that was constantly measured and scrupulously observed. In an article about the importance of the body in Barthes' writings, Mirosław Loba makes the following statement:

His [Barthes' – N.G.] youthful experience of the sick body had left such a deep mark on him that he kept returning to it in his later writings. The tuberculosis that afflicted him in his youth convinced him that the body was the birthplace of discourses distorting

²⁸ Ibidem, p. 105. Original text: "À force de vouloir déterminer l'œuvre par son contexte le plus vaste et le plus vivant, on néglige l'œuvre elle-même ; elle n'est pas un ensemble d'opérations concrètes, elle est une émanation, une évaporation quasi spirituelle et bientôt accessoire d'une seule réalité : l'auteur ; encore cette réalité est-elle rarement considérée dans ce qu'elle peut, comme corps humain, présenter de solidement observable ; l'auteur n'est ici le plus souvent que le lieu géométrique d'un certain nombre d'aventures, de crises, de passions et d'influences [...]" (R. Barthes, *L'avenir de la rhétorique*, op. cit., p. 139).

²⁹ T. Samoyault, op. cit., p. 178.

³⁰ Ibidem.

lived experience, that the body's destiny was inevitably semiotic, and that there was nothing natural about the feeling of having a body.³¹

This is precisely what Barthes said in the excerpt from *The Future of Rhetoric* cited before. When we take into consideration the fact that for some time Barthes was detached from his family, his friends, his natural background and from the events of history (since his stay at the sanatorium overlaps with the II World War), it's not surprising that he rebelled against the traditional school of Lanson's criticism that was preoccupied with these very elements. I believe that it was due to his exile in the confinements of a sanatorium that he understood that even if a given writer loses all the strings attaching them to a specific *milieu*, they would still have their own bodies as places from which spring every discourse, every thought, and written word.

Therefore, it is surprising is that in 1946 Barthes not only prepared the foundation for his famous theory of the death of the author, but also for its return as a body whose pulsation can be traced within the text. Nonetheless, this observation makes us wonder what happened between 1946 and 1967 when the question of corporality disappeared from the article published in *Aspen*. It might be argued that, in the 1960s, it was Barthes' interest in structuralism that, for a moment, made him abandon the original course of his thought and look directly at the level of language (objectified and not rooted in the bodily experience) as the only real phenomenon falling into the scope of literary criticism.

However, although in its theoretical layer, *The Death of the Author* erases the corporal aspects of writing, it does share some similarities with *The Future of Rhetoric* regarding the use of metaphors inspired by the feeling of "having a body". It seems that, in the 1946 article, the language used by Barthes was deeply rooted in his sanatorium experience. Metaphors concerning the development of literary studies revolve around two main themes: death and rebirth. The same is true for the 1967 article published in *Aspen*. This phenomenon becomes even more visible if we compare the closing parts of both texts. Final remarks from the *The Death of the Author* have the following form:

We are now beginning to let ourselves be fooled no longer by the arrogant antiphrastical recriminations of good society in favour of the very thing it sets aside, ignores, smothers, or destroys; we know that to give writing its future, it is necessary to overthrow the myth: the birth of the reader must be at the cost of the death of the Author.³²

³¹ M. Loba, "Le Corps de Roland Barthes", *Studia Romanica Posnaniensia* 2010, vol. 37, no. 1, p. 3. Original text: "La tuberculose qui l'avait frappé dans sa jeunesse lui a fait voir que le corps était le lieu où prennent naissance des discours qui dénaturaient le vécu, que le destin du corps était inévitablement sémiotique et que le sentiment d'avoir un corps n'avait rien de naturel.

³² R. Barthes, *The Death of the Author*, op. cit., p. 148. Original text: "Nous commençons maintenant à ne plus être dupes de ces sortes d'antiphrases, par lesquelles la bonne société récrimine superbement en faveur de ce que précisément elle écarte, ignore, étouffe ou détruit ;

It might come as a surprise that the unpublished article from 1946 ends on a somehow similar note:

Il est enough to know that it is on the level of language, of social language, that the fate of Belles Lettres will be played out in order to bring light into that taboo world of verbal creation, even if this must contribute to the death of all that we now call literature.³³

Il suffit de savoir que c'est sur le plan du langage, et du langage social, que se jouera le sort de[s] belles-lettres littérature pour devoir porter la lumière dans ce monde tabou de la création verbale, même si cela doit aider à la mort de tout ce que nous appelons présentement littérature.³⁴

The figures of speech used in these two texts, whose creation is separated by two decades, are remarkably similar. Barthes first refers to a certain set of cliché opinions about the writing act, using vocabulary related to rituals or beliefs (“the myth”, “this taboo world of verbal creation”). Then he announces the arrival of a new method of reading that is seen as a resurrection of sorts (“the birth of the reader”). However, the latter must be paid by the loss of something old still clinging to its life: “the death of everything we currently call literature” or “the death of the Author”. Moreover, in the case of *The Future of Rhetoric*, the death of literature is underscored by the fact that the very word has been explicitly crossed out by Barthes in the typescript and replaced by another one: “belles-lettres” (which again hints at the path he would take in his later career, while analysing works of mass culture).

In the 1940s, after enduring the hell of tuberculosis treatment, when he barely escaped death and was just returning to a new life, Barthes reached for formulations strongly associated with death and resurrection. Yet, the same way of thinking about changes within the discipline – as the demise of something old and the birth of something new – remained with him in the late 1960s, when the body disappeared from his theoretical writings for a while. In other words, what vanished at the purely theoretical level of Barthes’ works nevertheless continued to be an essential component of the symbols and metaphors he was using.

The purpose of the following analysis was to show that the origins of Barthes’ *The Death of the Author* can be traced back to his earliest texts and was to a great extent inspired by his experience of tuberculosis treatment. Seen in the context of Barthes’ two unpublished essays from the 1940s, the figure of the author,

nous savons que, pour rendre l'écriture son avenir, il faut en renverser la mythe : la naissance du lecteur doit se payer de la mort de l'Auteur.” (R. Barthes, *La mort de l'auteur*, op. cit., p. 69).

³³ R. Barthes, *The Future of Rhetoric*, op. cit., p. 114.

³⁴ Here, I quote a transcription of the typewritten version of Barthes’ article, with his handwritten corrections, which I was able to consult during my stay in Paris in 2024. I refer to this archival document to indicate how the correction made by Barthes connects to the metaphors present in his text. R. Barthes, BNF, NAF 28630, *L'avenir de la rhétorique*, p. 17.

compelling us to see life as an orderly logical whole, turns out to be a kind of escapist device (as the notion of destiny was for sanatorium patients). It shifts criticism away from what is, in Barthes's view, the most real phenomenon – from the experience of the body, with its suffering and its limitations, inscribed in the language. Thus, Loba statement that “[...] from the beginning of his career, Barthes has recognized that the passage of signs through the body leads to their profound modification [...]”³⁵ might have more significant implications as it concerns also the foundations of one of Barthes' most renowned theories.

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³⁵ M. Loba, *Le Corps de Roland Barthes*, op. cit., p. 5. Original text: “[...] Barthes admet depuis le début de sa carrière que le passage des signes par le corps amène leur profonde modification [...]”.