

The Importance of the Author in the Creation of Textual Meaning from the Perspectives of Ransom, Bakhtin and Barthes

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Abstract

John Crowe Ransom, Mikhail Bakhtin and Roland Barthes are all idiosyncratic and revolutionary scholars in terms of their ideas about the place of author and text. Thus, understanding their viewpoints and ideas concerning the importance of the author in the creation of textual meaning is highly significant to understand their influence over the literary world. Owing to the fact that all these scholars rejected some traditional views and introduced some new ideas to the thinking world, this study aims at reviewing key points of their ideas. In this respect, Ransom's New Criticism as a reaction to biographical and traditional historicism, Bakhtin's novel theory and Barthes' famous work 'The Death Of The Author' constitute the core discussion of this study.

Keywords: Ransom, Bakhtin, Barthes, new criticism, the death of the author, carnival, dialogism

RANSOM, BAHTİN VE BARTHES'İN BAKIŞ AÇILARINDAN METİNSEL ANLAMIN OLUŞUMUNDA YAZARIN ÖNEMİ

Öz

John Crowe Ransom, Mihail Bahtin ve Roland Barthes yazarın ve metnin yeri ile ilgili fikirleri bakımından kendine özgü ve yenilikçi düşünürlerdir. Bu nedenle, metinsel anlamın yaratılmasında yazarın önemi ile ilgili bakış açılarını ve fikirlerini anlamak, bu düşünürlerin edebi dünya üzerindeki etkilerini anlamak için oldukça önemlidir. Bu üç düşünürün bazı geleneksel görüşleri reddettiği ve düşünce dünyasına yeni fikirler getirdiği gerçeğinden hareketle, bu çalışma onların fikirlerine ait kilit noktaları gözden geçirmeyi amaçlamaktadır. Bu bağlamda, Ransom'un biyografik ve geleneksel tarihselciliğe bir tepki olarak ortaya koyduğu Yeni Eleştiri, Bahtin'in Roman Teorisi ve Barthes'ın ünlü eseri 'Yazarın Ölümü' bu çalışmanın temel tartışmasını oluşturmaktadır.

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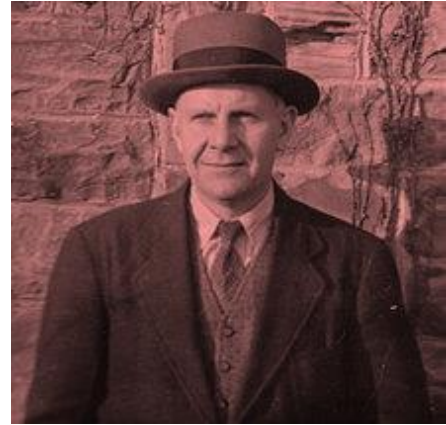
INTRODUCTION

There are various factors to understand a text correctly and completely. Since Ancient Greece to date there have been different tendencies and debates to understand the meaning of a text. While some critics claim that it is crucial to know the historical background and the views of the author along with the social, cultural, historical and literary context, in which the text has been written, to figure out a text completely; some other critics oppose to this idea. They do not accept the view that knowing about the author is helpful in understanding a text. Rather they claim that text itself is sufficient to grasp its meaning through its direct messages, subconscious or innuendos. This study aims at discussing the views of John Crowe Ransom, Mikhail Bakhtin and Roland Barthes as these theoreticians were among the pioneer literary critics of the twentieth century and their works still influence the literary world in our age. They also had an important role in the literary movements of the twentieth century. Owing to the fact that their ideas and theories highly contributed to the criticism of literary texts and found supporters all over the world, it is crucial to understand the importance of the author in the creation of textual meaning from the perspectives of Ransom, Bakhtin and Barthes.

RANSOM, BAKHTİN AND BARTHES

It is important to underline the fact that the ideas of Russian Formalists involving Mikhail Bakhtin were influential both in New Criticism and in Structuralism. Because some of the main figures of Russian Formalism like Roman Jakobson and Rene Wellek had moved to America before the World War II started, and their ideas were highly influential in the creation of New Criticism (Barry, 2009, p. 161). "The New Critical tenets to which they correspond are the notion of the poem as an organic whole and the distinction between artistic and scientific modes of discourse" (Pickering, 2008, p. 93). John Crowe Ransom, the author of *Criticism Inc.*, lived between 1888 and 1974 and became the central figure of a new literary movement called New Criticism in the United States in the mid twentieth century. According to his new literary criticism approach the text itself was in the centre of criticism. From this perspective, it is possible to maintain that his approach had a new and different perspective in literary criticism. In his time it was popular practice that literary historians and scholars used to teach literature with a focus on the "backgrounds, sources and influences rather than the poems themselves" (Leitch, 2001, p. 1106). It is possible to maintain that new criticism emerged as a reaction against the prior criticism methods like

biographical and traditional historical criticism, which was focused on extra-text materials, such as the biography of the author. However, in new criticism text was in the center of the criticism. In his work *Criticism Inc.*, Ransom states that literary criticism must be scientific, precise and systematic. He means that literary criticism must not be under the influence of other social disciplines like sociology, psychology, history, etc. If



John Crowe Ransom

literary critics are going to criticise a literary work, they must not cope with the background information of the author. He attempts to define the business of criticism. What it is not and what it should be. He lists a number of false or misleading types of current criticism. Ransom claims that the text, as a complete work of art, is sufficient for interpretation, and one should look at the text, and only the text, in order to analyse it and get the true meaning of it. For this reason, new criticism is quite well connected with the term close reading, which means the careful analysis of a text with paying attention to its structure, syntax, figures of speech, and so on. Through this way, a new critic tries to examine the formal elements of the text, such as characterization, setting of time and place, point of view, plot, images, metaphors and symbols to interpret the text and find the theme. However, Ransom thinks that poetry is a more powerful way of expressing ideas than a prose. According to him, prose is a simple way of expressing ideas while poetry is a more complex and philosophic way of expressing the same ideas. He says: "Poetry distinguishes itself from prose on the technical side by the devices which are, precisely, it means of escaping from prose. Something is continually being killed by prose which the poet wants to preserve. But this must be put philosophically. Philosophy sounds hard, but it deals with natural and fundamental forms of experience" (Ransom, 1937).

With these ideas, John Crowe Ransom had important place among the pioneer critics of English Literature in America. John Crowe Ransom contributed to the popularity of the close reading among the university students in the 1930s after British literary critics like I.A. Richards and T.S. Eliot who used the term in the 1920s. This close reading approach later became the central part of deconstruction theory of Jacques Derrida. Differently from John Crowe Ransom who believed in the power of poetry, Mikhail Mihailovic Bakhtin the leading name of the Russian Formalists believed in the power of novel. He also defended the autonomy and the organic unity of the text. In his works *Discourse in the Novel*, *Rabelais and His World* and 'Forms of Time and Chronotope in the Novel' Bakhtin (1895- 1975) introduced the quite noteworthy concepts such as the *carnavalesque*, the *chronotope*, and the *dialogism* of language to the literary world. These three concepts have important place in Bakhtin's theory



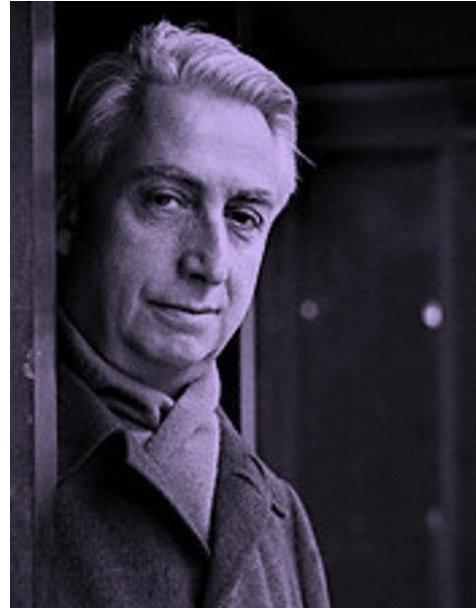
Mikhail Bakhtin

of the novel. He introduced the term *carnivalesque* in his *Rabelais and His World* for the first time. According to Bakhtin, carnivals, as informal social events, were the mere circumstances of egalitarianism where political oppression of legal authorities such as the state and the church were eliminated through its free thinking and entertaining atmosphere. In these multivoiced atmospheres of carnivals it is possible to come across the *heteroglossia*, the internal stratification of

language. According to Bakhtin conventional approaches for analysing the novelistic genre failed as no one understood the artistic uniqueness of novelistic discourse. All these critics, who did not understand the artistic uniqueness of novelistic discourse, focused on poetic language which indeed represents the individuality of language, image, etc. He maintains there is a *carnivalesque* feature in the novel which symbolizes the utterance of multivoices in the novel. It is clear that this feature of Bakhtin is different than Ransom, who believes that prose is a simple way of expressing ideas while poetry is a more complex and philosophic way of expressing the same idea. In his *Forms of Time and Chronotope in the Novel* Bakhtin introduces a new term *chronotope* to underline the connectedness or relativity of time and space in the novel. Bakhtin states that he was influenced by Einstein's theory of relativity when he formed his term *chronotope* which expresses "the intrinsic connectedness of temporal and spatial relationships that are artistically expressed in literature" (1981, p. 84). He stresses the fact that conventional critics fail to catch this feature as they are accustomed to learn single languageness. Differently from Ransom, Bakhtin opposes to the idea that novel is more rhetorical genre and has no artistic taste. He briefly defends the idea of novelistic discourse. He argues that poetry is *monologic* and there is only one unitary voice which is the voice of the author. Bakhtin also claims that this *monologic* voice in poetry is abstract and alien to the multivoices of the novel. He concludes that the voice of the poet is significant in poems, however, as there is not a *monoglossic* style in the novel, the representation of the internal stratification of language is important in the novels. According to Bakhtin, novel is a different and unique style in which we see free expressions of people from different strata of life, and where rules do not work. We witness a multivoiced atmosphere in the novel, but in the poem there is always just one voice. The terms *heterology* and *dialogis* have important place in Bakhtin's description of novel. With *heterology* Bakhtin means different voices, and with *dialogis* he means two voices in a dialogue form. Bakhtin maintains that internal connection between the author and the

hero is lost in the novel. Therefore, audiences cannot feel the existence of the author in the novel as much as they can in the poem for two reasons. First of all, poetry is monologic and the poet's is the only voice in the poem. Secondly, the novel is dialogic and the author merely creates a perspective for the characters in the novel. "The words of the author that represent and frame another's speech create a perspective for it, they separate light from shadow, create the situation and conditions necessary for it to sound; finally, they penetrate into the interior of the other's speech, carrying into it their own accents and their own expressions, creating for it a dialogizing background" (Bakhtin, 1981, p. 358). The *dialogis* of language the "intense interanimation and struggle between one's own and another's word" (Leitch, 2001, p. 1187). In his *Discourse in the Novel* he claims that language consists of dialogues indeed. Without dialogue there is not a meaning. Briefly stated, when we read a novel we see different characters and their utterances. People of different stratification speak in the novel. Bakhtin likes the dialogues of the novel, but he criticizes the monology of the poetry. According to him although the author creates the plot, setting, characters and the perspective of the novel, the characters become different individuals than the author. Therefore, he claims that there is no connection between the author and the characters anymore. According to Bakhtin this rupture between the writer and the characters gives the novel a unique characteristic. This disconnection between the writer and the hero of the novel would later be subject to a stronger assertion in 'The Death of the Author' by Roland Barthes. Bakhtin's claim as regards the disconnection between the author and the hero alters into a metaphoric death of the author in Barthes' work. In 'The Death of the Author' which has become a milestone in the literary criticism since it was published in 1968, Barthes argues that the author is important until she/he produces a literary work. When the author finishes writing and the book takes its place on the bookshelf, the reader does not need to know anything about the author so as to interpret the book. He adds "it is language which speaks, not the author" (1977, p. 143). Barthes brings Bakhtin's idea of *dialogism* to a similar but a different stage in which the author does not exist anymore. This metaphoric death of the author or the disconnection between the literary work and the author is a signal to underline the importance of the text and its relation to its audiences. He believes that "author is thought to nourish the book, which is to say that he exists before it, thinks, suffers, lives for it, is in the same relation of antecedence to his work as a father to his child" (Barthes, 1977, p. 145). According to Barthes the audience is able to find the meaning within the profoundness of the book. The reader does not need to know anything about the writer and the author is not the only source for interpreting the book correctly.

From this perspective, it is clear that Barthes' claim was a kind of repetition what John Crowe Ransom had said to criticise the traditional criticism methods previously. However, Barthes does not find the efforts of the New Critics sufficient. He says "Though the sway of the Author remains powerful (the new criticism has often done no more than consolidate it), it goes without saying that certain writers have long since attempted to loosen it" (1977, p. 143). Furthermore, in his 'From Work To Text' Barthes describes the author of the novel as "a paper author [whose] life is no longer the origin of his fictions but a fiction contributing to his work; there is



Roland Barthes

a reversion of the work on to the life (and no longer the contrary); it is the work of Proust, of Genet which allows their lives to be read as a text" (1977, p. 161). It is clear that according to Barthes the author of a fiction moves into a different phase or dimension after having completed the inscription. Having been inscribed, the text starts to feed the author as in the examples of Proust and Genet. Here Barthes tries to display the disconnection between the text and its author. According to him a kind of "disconnection occurs, the voice loses its origin, the author enters into his own death, writing begins" (1977, p. 142). In this scope New Critics and Barthes share similar view as regards to the power of the language and the author. They believe that the language is superior to the author (Harland, 1999, p. 234).

CONCLUSION

Despite being a member of different literary movements, John Crowe Ransom, Mikhail Bakhtin and Roland Barthes believed in a kind of rupture between the text and the author.

All of them believed that the text itself had to be in the centre of the criticism. For Ransom poetry has a philosophic language and is superior to prose. Bakhtin, on the other hand, defended the superiority of the novel. According to Bakhtin, we hear the voice of the author in a poem; but we cannot hear the voice of the author in the novel. Besides *heteroglossia* which is a term Bakhtin uses to explain the multivoiced feature of the novel, there is a *dialogic* form of the novel in which the author creates a perspective for the characters. Bakhtin thinks that *dialogic* form makes novel superior to poetry which is in the form of a monologue. According to Bakhtin, audiences may come across people belonging to different stratification in the novel, but in poetry it is only possible to hear the voice of its poet.

Therefore, Bakhtin likes the dialogues of the novel, but he criticizes the monology of the poetry. Bakhtin also believes a disconnection between the author and the hero he has created in the novel. As for Ransom, he severely criticised the previous criticism approaches like biographical and traditional historical criticism. Therefore, he defended the view that audiences do not need to know anything about the author in order to understand the meaning of a text. Roland Barthes describes this disconnection between the author and the text in his 'The Death Of The Author'. According to Barthes language is superior to the author. He claims that after an author having completed to write it, the text starts to feed its author. Consequently, it is possible to underscore the fact that Ransom, Bakhtin and Barthes all, shared a common notion as regards the power of the language and the text, rather than its author.

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