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Article:

Allen, A. orcid.org/0000-0003-0533-6251 (2023) Roland Barthes and the death of the teacher. Oxford Review of Education. ISSN 0305-4985

<https://doi.org/10.1080/03054985.2023.2289510>

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To cite this article: Ansgar Allen (05 Dec 2023): Roland Barthes and the death of the teacher, Oxford Review of Education, DOI: [10.1080/03054985.2023.2289510](https://doi.org/10.1080/03054985.2023.2289510)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/03054985.2023.2289510>



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Roland Barthes and the death of the teacher

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ABSTRACT

This paper considers the consequences of ‘The Death of the Author’, a short essay by Roland Barthes, for educational thought. Seeking to avoid a co-option of Barthes to the work of educational redemption, Barthes’ essay is considered in terms of its more disturbing implications. In particular, the parallel question of ‘The Death of the Teacher’ is entertained. Here the Teacher is treated as an organising ideal, which, like Nietzsche’s ‘death of God’, is able to die insofar as it ceases to organise and give sustenance to actors who might otherwise depend upon its sanctioning authority. This possibility is considered alongside that of the peculiar afterlife experienced by the teacher as actor, the teacher who speaks but can no longer draw resource or security from the kind of respect that the profession might feel it is still owed.

KEYWORDS

Barthes; educational theory; literary theory; education; critical pedagogy

Introduction

The influence on education theory of ‘The Death of the Author’, a short essay by Roland Barthes (1977a), has been fairly limited.¹ Nonetheless, its deployment has been symptomatic of the field, insofar as Barthes has been set to work as a resource to improve educational practice or offer other ways of conceptualising its enhancement. Barthes has been used to argue for educational environments which encourage the acquisition of ‘critical thinking skills’ (Raitt, 2018; Tabačková, 2015), including specific pedagogies to assist students to develop their own interpretative ‘take’ on a text (Alves, 2018; Critten, 2016; Manuel, 2013; Moore, 2023). Barthes has also been applied with qualification in research seeking to better orient the teaching of writing in the humanities (Cascardi, 2019), even if his own writing is also attacked in the same article for creating categories ‘simply by the power of a capital letter, and that are in turn supported by a set of sweeping claims that are unsullied by anything as pedestrian as a textual reference’ (p. 314). His essay, ‘The Death of the Author’ has been invoked to denounce narrow and authoritarian habits of teaching, and support those claiming to help students develop greater autonomy and challenge dominant readings and structures of authority (Condee, 2016; Gray, 2017; Hammond, 2018; Parr et al., 2015; Satchwell, 2019). It has been suggested that ‘The Death of the Author’ be directly used as a pedagogical text, whereupon Barthes essay might be taught so as to

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challenge the chief fallacy it identifies. This is the assumption that a text can be understood if the witting or unwitting intentions of its author are discovered. It is the fallacy which holds; ‘when the author has been found, the text is “explained”’ (Barthes, 1977a, p. 147). Such a lesson might seek to develop a more open reading of texts, a mode of study that is less dependent on the biography or intentions of the author as explanatory categories.

This, indeed, is what Moore (2023) recommends: students who ‘learn the basics of Roland Barthes’s theory’ can be encouraged to ‘move toward readerly empowerment’ (p. 98). By teaching ‘The Death of the Author’, educators will convince students of the validity of their own interpretations, and empower them via a pedagogy that seeks to ‘reclaim authority from the Author-god’ (p. 97). This is especially important when it comes to challenging the additional layer of ‘adult normativity’ that permeates critical understanding of texts and reinforces ‘adult readings’ of literature to the detriment of student engagement (p. 98). Such an approach might also be employed to good effect, Moore adds, as a technique to help subvert the high stakes testing regimes which dominate (in this case US schooling) and serve to prioritise the authority of the teacher whilst encouraging passivity among students. Moore (2023) does add a qualifier or two, arguing that some of the radicalism of Barthes’ ‘manifesto’ needs to be tempered. For instance:

Educators who introduce the Death of the Author must temper it so that students do not exclude valuable context when they craft their own interpretations. Knowing an author’s time period, genre, and perhaps their gender will add valuable context to even a Death of the Author-inspired reading. (p. 103).

Indeed, some measure of ‘respect’ for the author must be taught alongside, Moore adds, citing Smith and Rabinowitz (2005): ‘Only after readers learn how to respect authors can they resist them’ (pp. 13–14). This might be read alongside Barthes’ own recommendation, that it is necessary to undermine the assumption that it is necessary to show ‘respect for the manuscript and the author’s declared intentions’ before all else (Barthes, 1977b, p. 160).

In response to this kind of deployment of ‘The Death of the Author’ as a prompt to better, more liberatory and critical practices within the classroom, it is worth pondering how Barthes also reconfigures the role of the critic in that very same essay. When Barthes challenged the reign of the Author, he also challenged that of the Critic, stating: ‘the reign of the Author has also been that of the Critic’ (1977a, p. 147). He envisages another, more open form of criticism, a mode of enquiry that would not shut possibilities down or have criticism tread familiar lines of thought. Rather, it would create a ‘neutral, composite, oblique space where our subject slips away, the negative where all identity is lost, starting with the very identity of the body of writing’ (1977a, p. 142). Criticism after Barthes is more about allowing meaning to proliferate and then enduring the attendant loss of conviction, whereupon ‘everything is to be *disentangled*, nothing *deciphered*’ (Barthes, 1977a, p. 147). Meaning is ceaselessly evaporated in the process of reading like this, where ‘the space of writing is to be ranged over’ and not penetrated (p. 147), where there is nothing beneath for the critic to gain purchase in and build their arguments upon. This could not be further removed from the idea of encouraging students to develop their own stance, or position, in relation to a text or an idea. Elsewhere, Barthes is perfectly blunt on this

point: Those seeking to pass agency back to students, to allow them to ‘express themselves’, are effectively replacing ‘a form of repression by a misconception’ (Barthes, 1977b, p. 162).

Evidently, applying Barthes to educational problems does not come without complication. One might ask what ‘a neutral, composite, oblique space’ where the subject slips away would indeed look like in an educational context, or if an existing educational institution could tolerate such a space if it ever emerged? Similarly, how would a teaching environment be sustained to the satisfaction and consent of all participants in which there was agreement that nothing would be deciphered, and so, no answers would be given or reached for? And lastly, how would, or could, any notion of a progressive or liberatory educational practice survive without the idea that encouraging student agency, or self-expression, are necessary goods? This paper will not endeavour to answer such questions. Rather, it treats such questions as symptoms of a kind of analysis it is attempting to avoid. The point is not to fit Barthes’ work to existing educational ideas, or alternately, make existing educational ideas fit with Barthes, by posing and then solving some of the intractable problems this endeavour presents. The purpose here is to explore those places where Barthes does not very well fit, or connect up to existing educational thinking, and seek thereby to perturb educational thought from those very vantage points.

In question here is the dominant mode of analysis which characterises educational research, a form of analysis that is essentially redemptive in its intent (Peim, 2018) and which submits, as Peim argues (drawing from Barthes), to education as the ‘master myth of our time’ (2013, p. 32). As such, where education is shown to err, effort will be made to correct it, or offer guidance that will enhance or deepen the educational experience. Bojesen traces this commitment back (via Leo Bersani) to Nietzsche’s theoretical man, who was first and then enduringly embodied in the figure of Socrates; ‘the man who attributes to thought the power to “correct” existence’ (Bersani cited in Bojesen, 2020, p. 28). This fits in with the parallel legacy of what Nietzsche called ‘Socratism’ (2003, p. 75), namely, ‘the belief that despite our ignorance everything is knowable, and hence *teachable*’ (Allen, 2017, p. 172, original emphasis). A good deal of the work of redemption is geared towards returning education to its inherent but as yet unfulfilled promise, so that it may do better at ‘doing away with unsociability in the name of shaping souls disposed to social order and its progress’ (Bojesen, 2020, p. 29). This redemptive work not only downplays the enduring negativity which seems to be built into educational experience (Clarke, 2019), it acts as a restraint upon work seeking to explore the negativity, if not the fecundity of the various perversions educational activity facilitates or embodies. This paper attempts, therefore, a more open reading of Barthes in relation to educational matters, with a particular interest in how Barthes’ work might be attended to for its derangements, or its ability to help disorient educated thinking.

Educational readings: deprioritising the Teacher

The application of Barthes’ essay to educational matters has been presented as fairly straightforward, or at least direct, as if the word ‘Teacher’ could simply be substituted for ‘Author’ and ‘student’ for ‘reader’. This may be either assumed, as for Moore (2023) or Hammond (2018), or explicitly stated, as Parr et al. (2015) write:

What really leapt out at me in reconsidering Barthes' essay, were the similarities between the binaries of Author–Reader and Teacher–Student . . . When I considered *The Death of the Author*, in the Teacher–Student paradigm, it made me realise the important role the Reader or the Student plays in the creation of meaning, as well the importance of the Teacher to avoid the role of God or prophet in the Literature classroom. (p. 146).

Gray (2017) does something like this when discussing a quote from Barthes's *S/Z*: 'when we substitute the concepts of "teaching" for "literature" and "student" for "reader", the statement is just as accurate and relevant for the higher education industry' (p. 99). Following this substitution of terms, Barthes' writing is subsequently re-read and re-deployed for educational ends. The following quote from *S/Z* (Barthes, 1974):

Our literature is characterized by the pitiless divorce which the literary institution maintains between the producer of the text and its user, between its owner and its customer, between its author and its reader. This reader is thereby plunged into a kind of idleness – he is intransitive; he is, in short, *serious*: instead of functioning himself, instead of gaining access to the magic of the signifier, to the pleasure of writing, he is left with no more than the poor freedom either to accept or reject the text: reading is nothing more than a *referendum*. (Barthes cited in Gray, 2017, p. 99).

Then becomes:

Our modern teaching practice is characterized by the pitiless divorce which the *education establishment* maintains between the *provider of education* and its *receiver*, between the *school* and its *constituent*, between *the teacher* and *the student*. This *student* is thereby plunged into a kind of idleness – she is intransitive; she is, in short, *not playful*: instead of functioning herself, instead of gaining access to the magic of the signifier, to the pleasure of *learning*, she is left with no more than the poor freedom either to accept or reject the *curriculum*: reading is nothing more than a *vote on acceptance*. (Gray, 2017, pp. 99–100).

And as Gray (2017) goes on to write:

I am not aware of a more apt (and oddly prophetic) description of the increasingly bloated, bureaucratic, and commodified twenty-first-century higher education industry. Nor am I aware of a more apt description of what has been called the 'teacher-centred classroom.' (p. 100).

This is a good example of how Barthes' writing may be re-read and re-deployed for educational ends. When Barthes announces the rise of the reader and the retreat of the Author, his thought is applied to educational problems as if he were an advocate for the empowerment of the student against the authority of the teacher.

As already indicated above, however, Barthes (1977c) is actually quite explicit that he is not arguing for the reversal of social roles between teacher and student (where the student becomes a teacher, and the teacher a student), nor is he arguing to 'abolish the distinction in functions' (where the separation teacher/student ceases to take effect) (p. 206). Rather, Barthes is more interested in disorienting all concerned, where neither teacher nor student would ever be in '*his right place*' (original emphasis). Barthes has no interest, as he writes, in 'squabbling for "authority", for the "right" to speak' (p. 205). These are remarkably stark statements which should give pause to thought for any co-option of Barthes to the agenda of either a progressive or a critical pedagogy.

And yet, as Gray (2017) maintains, the work of Roland Barthes should encourage teachers to give their students greater 'opportunity to participate in the course's

production of meaning' (p. 96): in effect, students are to become co-producers or co-writers of their learning and the classroom is to become less 'teacher-centric'. These may be valuable interventions in the work of critical pedagogy, but the disruptive potential of Barthes' thought remains fairly limited in this application. The liberated student is still imagined as a participant within a university, or a college, that largely resembles the institution from which the educational critic, the author of these arguments, currently writes. Indeed, even the traditional lecture theatre has its place in Gray's writing. 'This is not to say that the lecture has no place in the college classroom ...', writes Gray, if broader efforts are made to shift the emphasis away from passive learning to more active and 'playful' engagements (2017, p. 102). Hammond (2018) does something similar, engaging Barthes to present a critique of the didactic-teacher/passive-student dyad, yet enters into a defence of the lecture, which can still be 'creatively catalytic and dynamic' (p. 12). Each author remains optimistic, then, that structures of authority can be challenged within existing educational architectures, and liberatory pedagogies (in the case of Gray) or insurrectional teaching (in the case of Hammond) can still thrive there.

This reluctance to immediately dispense with educational archetypes such as the traditional lecture theatre, or the familiar seminar, might find some support in Barthes' own reservations concerning the student revolts of May 1968. But when Barthes expressed reservations, his concern was directed at its lack of radicalism, at the continued entrapment of those involved within a symbolic system it only seemingly escaped by the immediacy of its speech and action (see Barthes, 1986b). As Wermer-Colan (2016, p. 134) interprets: 'If Barthes kept a distance from the events of May 1968, it was because he recognized that the global insurrections did not presage a revolution of the world order so much as the decadent spectacle of its unlikely possibility'.

A figurative death

Any positive redeployment of arguments made in 'The Death of the Author' in the educational domain, must assume that Barthes surely did not mean (could not mean) what he wrote when he attached that title to his text. When Barthes writes of the death of the Author, he does not mean that the author dies, only that the idea of the Author diminishes in its significance. And since ideas cannot 'die', not strictly speaking, Barthes' use of the word 'death' might be taken as merely figurative. Perhaps a better title might be 'the diminishment of the Author', or 'the decentred Author', for this, indeed, is how Barthes' thought is translated to its educational context. When things diminish, or become decentred, they do not present the same kind of existential challenge as they might when they 'die'.

It is along such lines that 'The Death of the Author' has been welcomed as another framework to think with and deploy against so-called 'teacher-centric' classrooms. If this 'death' is read metaphorically, it can be welcomed, and the teacher can happily live out its consequences. Alternatively, the word 'death' can be left off entirely. As Moore (2023) writes: 'The Death of the Author theory needs a handier title when used in the classroom, one that emphasizes the more central role of the student reader'. The term 'reader empowerment' is favoured instead (p. 104).

With Barthes appearing to both predict and advocate the end of the Author in this softened sense, Barthes can be applied to predict and advocate for the end of

a certain kind of teacher, or a certain kind of dependence on the idea of the Teacher in educational thought and practice. Barthes can then be placed alongside other, more established figures in critical pedagogy, who also seek to encourage more collaborative, less teacher-led pedagogic interactions. As Smith (2017) writes, 'much like Ivan D. Illich and Paulo Freire before him, and so many since the emergence of Critical Pedagogy ... Barthes calls for participation, for plurality, for co-production' (p. 37). His work may accordingly be employed to support a variety of progressive aims, including 'creative empowerment' (Hammond, 2018, p. 9), 'readerly empowerment' (Moore, 2023, p. 98), and 'active learning' (Gray, 2017, p. 99).

This application of Barthes continues the work of critical pedagogues who seek in various ways to challenge the notion that educational activity needs to be organised around the authority of the teacher, figured as a source of authority, epistemological reckoning, and moral direction. With the idea of the Teacher removed from its position of power and authority, students (and reformed teachers) might reoccupy educational spaces and reinvest them with purpose and direction. To borrow (and further co-opt) words from Barthes' essay, the educational critic might again seek to 'overthrow the myth' that the teacher needs to adopt a traditional role (1977a, p. 148). In other words, Barthes' essay can be applied within the context of educational thinking as yet another argument for rethinking the so-called traditional classroom, as providing another set of theoretical resources for realising the promise of education in its full democratic potentiality. This removal from dominance of the (old-school) teacher is figured as the removal of a negative, constraining influence, in favour of the so-called liberation of human potential. The over-arching mythological structure of education, or what Peim calls its function as a general 'onto-theological principle' (Peim, 2012, p. 227), remains undisturbed.

And so, when Barthes writes 'the birth of the reader must be at the cost of the death of the Author' (Barthes, 1977a, p. 148), this will be treated as merely another rhetorical flourish with which to end his essay. It certainly will not be translated as: the birth of the student must be at the cost of the death of the teacher. The word 'death' can again here be substituted with less demanding words such as 'questioning' or 'retreat'. If Barthes only argues for the removal of the Author from a position of dominance after which everything else stays intact – if there is no death, no period of mourning, no radical unsettlement or ontological convulsion imagined here – the educational critic can in turn continue the work of challenging so-called 'traditional teaching' without worrying too much about the consequences of Barthes' thought for education more broadly. With no effort needed to imagine the death of the Teacher, Barthes merely encourages us to figure the classroom as a place in which the teacher plays a less prominent role. Barthes appears to provide just another way of saying that 'any utterance of the instructor, in whatever modality, cannot be considered final or authoritative' (Gray, 2017, p. 111). With the deleterious effects of high stakes testing challenged by innovative pedagogies (inspired in this case by Barthes), teachers and students alike can now 'can set their sights much higher' (Moore, 2023, p. 108).

It might be asked just how far we have travelled from older, more established humanist notions that the university or school will be a place of personal development and discovery.

Literal and conceptual death

To avoid the co-option of Barthes' essay to educational thought, it is worth returning to Barthes' point that human beings are not so much liberated by the death of the Author as are the texts themselves, texts that are not tied to the intentions of their so-called authors or 'scribes', but exist according to their own inter-textual, extra-moral dynamics. This is another way of saying that if Barthes is to be applied to education, it is time to give up wrangling over what Barthes' essay does or does not mean for the professional practice of the teacher. The problem cannot be one of how the teacher is supposed to enact Barthes' ideas even if that enactment constitutes a kind of retreat. Rather, the teacher who reads Barthes comes to realise 'it's not meant to be about me' (Smith, 2017, p. 39). To ask what Barthes does or does not mean for one's professional practice is to risk missing the point. If Barthes has anything to teach the teacher, it is to think a-professionally, or even against the profession.

The concept of death here assumes its importance as a fundamentally anti-humanistic sign, or operator. If Barthes' ideas are to be applied to education without immediate domestication, if they are allowed to perturb education and prompt educational thought to abandon its commonplaces, precisely this kind of signal may be needed.

Although Barthes is not imagining the literal death of the author, 'death' should not be placed to one side as if it were a rhetorical flourish that can be done away with and not thought about any further. It is tempting, of course, to read the title of the essay as an over-statement, as an exaggerated point, as an absurd claim, perhaps, since authors continue to live and write. Too frequently Barthes' essay has been responded to with the easy, and facile remark, that the individual author has continued to live and prosper despite his intervention, as if Barthes has been found out by the test of time as guilty of hyperbole.

Even sympathetic treatments can read Barthes in this way, or at least to this effect. The arguments within 'The Death of the Author' are now considered seriously and are given their due, but the essay is still treated as a polemic and the idea of the death of the Author is read as an exaggerated remark within that context. For instance, Gallop (2011) follows Derrida (2001) in focusing on the relationship between the author's literal death and the conceptual death considered by Barthes. Her analysis is situated there, between 'the abstract, polemical death of the slogan and a moving, more bodily death of the mortal author' (Gallop, 2011, pp. 4–5). It is this 'perverse' juxtaposition which occupies Gallop (Gallop, 2011) in *The Deaths of the Author*, a book which echoes, in its title, Derrida's 'The Deaths of Roland Barthes' (2001). In the latter, Derrida was preoccupied with the 'indecent' of writing about a friend's work so soon after their death (p. 49) – this was written in 1981 – of treating a friend as an 'author' and thereby enacting another kind of 'death' by way of that abstraction.² Derrida does not reference Barthes' essay explicitly, but his title clearly pays homage to it. Derrida writes about his friend in a manner he would have never done when Barthes lived, and this is what bothers him. As a broader conceptual problem, the death of the Author is mentioned when Derrida (2001, p. 45) writes: 'Roland Barthes is the name of someone who can no longer hear or bear it . . . But if his name is no longer his, was it ever?'

This statement would seem to merely echo what Barthes had already written, where Barthes questions the attachment of the name of the Author to the person who bears that

name. The focus of Derrida's essay remains with the issue of Derrida's unavoidable 'infidelity' to his friend. As with Gallop, these preoccupations are again concerned more with the ethics of dealing with an author's actual death.

Either way, the death of the Author is dismissed or downplayed. In each case it is turned away from as a problem that must be confronted in terms of its abysmal consequences. The first mode of dismissal is openly stated and is tied to the dismissal of Barthes more broadly; the second is cloaked in an appreciation of his work and transformed into an ethical dilemma. It seems that Barthes' essay is appreciated as it is rejected, by addressing the problem of death at the level of individual tragedy.

The announcement of death and the ears that will not hear

It is tempting to approach the title of Barthes' essay the other way round. Rather than view it as a polemic overstatement or slogan, or as a prompt for ethical wrangling, 'The Death of the Author' becomes a remark that can never be delivered with words that will carry the force of the idea. The death of the Author is not seen as an exaggeration but is treated as a claim that always risks understatement, that will fail to confront its audience with the full sensation of its unsettling. This death announcement signals something like the failed ontological convulsion that Nietzsche (1974) famously describes in *The Gay Science*. The madman declares God is Dead and is confronted by an audience that does not have the ears for his words. The same might be said of Foucault's death announcement in *The Order of Things* where he announces that Man too will soon be dead (Foucault, 1985). In each case the death announcement is a signal of a far greater crisis in sense and our ability to orient ourselves within the world. Barthes, Foucault, and Nietzsche are each concerned with the consequences of living beyond the ordering ideas of Author, Man, and God, where the death of the Author, the death of the person who 'originates' and 'authorises' can be read alongside the death of God of which it is a faint echo.³

The idea of 'the death of the Teacher' might be figured in similar terms. This death announcement might be seen as an attempt to think through the consequences of an eclipse of the Teacher's authority, of our entry into a world in which the Teacher has become irrelevant. This is a world in which nobody cares for the Teacher and the cares of the Teacher can no longer gain purchase. That is the disaster 'the death of the Teacher' – if it were to be proclaimed – both detects and predicts. Each death announcement above, the death each predicts or already observes, is now here understood as a cataclysmic event that extends far beyond a mere intellectual challenge to the idea of the Author (or of God, or Man), to disturb those frameworks of understanding (and security) that depend upon them. It is an event that is already here, that is already occurring, or has already occurred but has not yet been fully felt. If Barthes' ideas are to be applied to education, the end, or the death of the Teacher, might be considered in a similar way.

A note on capitalisation might be useful here. Derrida (2001) notices that Barthes frequently capitalises words (Nature and History, are his examples), which, 'far from indicating a hypostatization, actually lift up and lighten, expressing disillusionment and incredulity' (p. 37). And this is how the Author is made to appear in Barthes' essay, as a world-historical figure (at least for the bourgeois outlook), a domineering idea that Barthes then goes on to undermine. By extension, the same might be done to the idea of the Teacher. It is worth insisting on

capitalising that word to distinguish it first of all, and most obviously, from the individual teacher. But it is also worth doing in order to give that word its due, that is to say, to supply by way of its capitalisation an indication of its conceptual and historical weight, before noting disillusionment and incredulity before the very idea of the Teacher, a notion that is already on the way out.

Figuring the Death of the Teacher

For Barthes, with the idea of a subject and originator of a text done away with, once a text is no longer understood in terms of the intentions or biographical conditions which birthed it, we do not simply refuse to ‘assign a “secret”, an ultimate meaning, to the text’ (1977a, p. 147), we are unable to find secure meaning even where we wish for it. This liberates what Barthes calls ‘the space of writing’. It releases ‘what may be called an anti-theological activity, an activity that is truly revolutionary since to refuse to fix meaning is, in the end, to refuse God and his hypostases – reason, science, law’ (p. 147).

The death of the Teacher, in turn, must announce the death of the hope of meaningful teaching and being meaningfully taught, at least to the extent that these notions are organised around reason, science, and law. The death of the Teacher signals that there is nothing to teach, and nothing can be taught, because the teacher has lost authority and the means of regaining it. The Teacher has been or is in the process of being demythologised. The aura of the Teacher is reduced and functions less and less to procure respect. At last, the Teacher invites only incredulity before the very idea that this figure deserves an audience, that it should be paid any attention. This might seem excessive, but what, after all, is every dismissal of the teacher by a parent, or a politician, if not a presentiment of that incredulity?

There is nothing remaining to authorise the Teacher’s speech. And here, in a perverse twist, not even the *loss* of their authority can authorise it. That is to say, not even the most radical demands of critical pedagogy to decentre the classroom, not even ‘this Educational Turn: that is everywhere present but dead’ (Smith, 2017, p. 38), can return dignity and purpose. If the practicing teacher is to survive an event as cataclysmic as this, they will need to operate without any kind of sanction or source of legitimation. There will be no idea, no myth, no rationale, that is sufficient to organise and justify that teacher’s existence. Not even the myth of performance, audit, or measurement (surely its last and most reliable myth) will suffice to organise and give sanction to their work, a kind of sanction which confers dignity or security. The teacher will be denied any fixed conception of what it means to occupy that role, least of all the enduring idea that the teacher is someone who does ‘good’ in the world. From a humanist perspective, such a teacher might just as well be dead.

The extension, or apparent transliteration, of the arguments in ‘The Death of the Author’ so that they became arguments concerning a so-called ‘Death of the Teacher’, can nonetheless be challenged as an operation that is in itself a little problematic or at least partial, for it develops only part of the analysis Barthes has to offer, and here this paper must allow for a pause.⁴

To the Seminar

It could be argued, first of all, that the wrong essay is being read here, and that 'To the Seminar' is Barthes' most educationally relevant text (Barthes, 1986a). Although it is not half as well known, 'To the Seminar' has been studied by education scholars, and has, like 'The Death of the Author' been recruited to some well-established pedagogical traditions. See Thompson (2013), who puts Barthes to work in this way, arguing that it is possible to set up something like the seminar he describes. Thompson uses Barthes to imagine communities of enquiry which would be established within the space of the contemporary university as locations that could successfully resist the deleterious effects of accountability. Indeed, and in an act of extraordinary co-option, Thompson argues that Barthes' reading 'clings to [and advances] the original idea of *Bildung* and *Wissenschaft*, as suggested by Kant and Humboldt' (p. 298).

Such a reading must downplay several features of the seminar Barthes imagines: Firstly, the seminar Barthes imagines is utopian. 'To the Seminar' orients itself to an impossible vision of education. Indeed, this is what prompts Smith (2017) to declare a kind of love-hate relationship with Barthes' text:

I hate 'To the Seminar' by Roland Barthes ... because it's so ... French. So 70s. So a product of a particular milieu ... a milieu so full of hope and possibility and risk and daring and ambition, so unlike our own ... I cannot teach 'To the Seminar' by Roland Barthes because I can't afford to be so ... ambitious. So daring. So risky. So ... laissez-faire. (pp. 37–38).

Secondly, 'To the Seminar' has implications that are destructive. The destruction Barthes' seminar entrains is not entirely of its own doing, or at least, the seminar Barthes imagines constitutes a wilful and deliberate response to a moribund society. As Barthes (1986a) writes, the seminar establishes a space of suspension, 'it intervenes in a certain apocalypse of culture', a situation in which 'culture, in its entirety, is no longer sustained by a humanist ideology (or is increasingly reluctant to sustain it)' (p. 341). The seminar helps those involved to see how this moribund culture now only 'returns to our lives as comedy, farce, masquerade' (p. 342). Hence the seminar (in 'To the Seminar') is not so much destructive of humanist culture, including humanist intellectual culture, as it is an attempt to forge a space, a place to live and think together in its ruins.

Lastly, nothing much of respectable intellectual culture (or the remains of that culture) would survive the seminar, which is figured as an erotic or at least '*amorous*' space (Barthes, 1986a, p. 332), 'a web of amorous relations' (p. 333), or as Steven Ungar (1982) once wrote in a piece on Barthes' 'The Professor of Desire' – 'a privileged site where eros and knowledge converge' (p. 82). It will be a place of disappointment too, which will be pushed at times to a '*climax*' where 'intellectual indignation and sexual fiasco' meet. It will be a place of '*eroticism*', with passing snatches of knowledge and understanding producing a 'minor erethism' which 'relaxes, releases knowledge, relieves it of its burden of utterances' (Barthes, 1986a, pp. 334–335, original emphasis). The problem with the acquisition of knowledge is that it dies with the body, hence the need of an amorous circuit where that death is to some extent cheated as circulating knowledge 'mounts up' between those involved (p. 338). They would be arranged in a manner analogous to what Barthes calls the Sadean 'ring of pleasure' (p. 337). As such, the seminar operates by

'gently assuming the immorality of a fissure within the totality which presses in on all sides' (p. 341). The seminar, for Barthes, is a fragile but necessary thing, it achieves nothing more than 'a *partial utopia*' (p. 341, original emphasis), as a locus of circulating relations, a site of praxis and intoxication, an orgasmic circuit that gives expression to the transitory impulses of the bodies it assembles, and which releases those bodies, in that process, from the demands of sedimented knowledge and the stupefying effects of authority. This is something Smith (2017) also picks up on, and develops in a speculative footnote:

the seminar is from Middle English *seminary*, from Latin, *seminarium*, 'seed plot', neuter of *seminarius* of seed, from *semen* 'seed' stipulating that *the* seminar, and perhaps even more so to *seminar*, is not just always already psychoanalytic but also always and already sexological. (p. 38)

'To the Seminar' would clearly be a fruitful essay to explore further for the purposes of deranging set educational ideas. But for the present analysis it is worth staying with the problem of substituting Teacher for Author a little longer.

The problem with speaking

In the essay, 'Writers, Intellectuals, Teachers', which was first published in 1971, Barthes makes a clear distinction between writing and speaking. If the teacher is one who works mainly by speaking, this must, by extension, draw a line between the writer (as author or scribe), and the teacher. As Barthes begins his essay: 'What follows depends on the idea that there is a fundamental tie between teaching and speech' (Barthes, 1977c, p. 190).

The constraint of speech, Barthes claims, is that it is *irreversible* – 'a word cannot be *retracted*, except precisely by saying that one retracts it' (p. 190). The paradox here, as Barthes points out, is that it is 'ephemeral speech' and not so-called 'monumental writing' that is indelible: 'All that we can do in the case of a spoken utterance is to tack on another utterance' (pp. 190–191). The speaker can only make themselves understood, moreover, if they maintain 'a certain speed of delivery', where silence and vacillation are forbidden, or at least, produce unbearable awkwardness for speaker and listener alike. This is because 'the articulatory speed binds each point of the sentence to what immediately follows or precedes' (p. 191). If that speed is disrupted, and the words fail to articulate, speech becomes cumbersome, is experienced as unbearable, and produces, thereby, its own intolerance for those who have rendered it so awkward. This demand to speak with a certain speed, the correct speed, imposes restraints on speech and what can be spoken. This bind between words, this enslavement to a certain pace of delivery and connectedness, makes it 'impossible for the word to "set off" towards distant and strange paradigms' (p. 191). The spoken word must be clear, where this demand for clarity is to the 'banishment of polysemy'. All of which ensures that speech, unlike writing, 'serves the Law—all speech is on the side of the Law' (p. 191, original emphasis).⁵ The consequences for teaching are threefold:

First, the teacher who operates on the side of speech is tied to the pace of speaking, to a certain speed of delivery. The teacher is enchained by their speaking voice to their profession in speaking. They are tied to the intolerance that speech has for vacillation or pause. The logic of speech appears here connected to the logic of more or less constant attention, to the idea that a healthy educational

environment is productive and fully engaged, that it is a place where the pace of activity is even and unabated. And if this teacher courts silence in favour of the speech of their pupils, the expectation remains that the teacher's silence will be filled by the enthused, unabated, productive speech of those pupils. For this reason, the space of the classroom is only apparently relinquished by the retreat of the teacher if it remains dominated by the logic of dialogue, by a kind of dialogue that positions speakers and establishes positions, that remains instrumentally driven, that is incessantly talkative.⁶

Second, the teacher operates on the side of the Law, and the confinement of thought, insofar as the speech of the teacher is necessarily, structurally, intolerant of strange flights to odd paradigms, to polysemy, to confusion, to vacillation, and the space of doubt. Operating on the side of the Law, the teacher may struggle to cope with divergent voices, with contributions that are not on point, and will be inclined to only allow within the setting of the classroom (just as in the setting of tests), that which can be said and stated with reasonable precision, or fluency; that is to say, contributions which fit with the curriculum and the intentions of the school.

Third, this teacher cannot die as the Author dies. The Author dies when the function that the idea of the Author performs in grouping together texts, and organising them, no longer holds or begins to weaken in its grip upon readers. The Author dies because it is an organising idea that has exhausted its usefulness, or its time. The teacher, who is on the side of speech, exists differently, not so much as an organising idea (the Teacher), but as an actor, as an actor enchained to and produced in the activity of speaking. The teacher is not about to die because the teacher is tied to speech, and speech is an activity that is formed on the basis that it is irreversible, that it must perpetuate itself, that it will never resolve around a particular choice of words (unlike writing, which can be completed, and abandoned), nor will it lend the speaker a definitive image of themselves, an image of the Teacher:

Imagine that I am a teacher: I speak, endlessly, in front of and for someone who remains silent ... I am the person who, under cover of *setting out* a body of knowledge, *puts out* a discourse, *never knowing how that discourse is being received* and thus for ever forbidden the reassurance of a definitive image – even if offensive – which would *constitute me*. (Barthes, 1977c, p. 194)

Conceptualised in this way, then, the teacher 'lives on', not because of their intrinsic health or vivacity or passion, or because the teacher is committed to their calling, or driven by the nobility of their work, or sustained by a secure image of what they should be (where each is another vision of the Teacher in its capitalised sense). The teacher is driven to continue because of the logic of speech, its tendency to always add another few words, its hatred of gaps and pauses and vacancies. The teacher lives on and by way of this speech-driven intolerance of anything which cannot be 'connected' to and articulated within the educational environment.

Coda

This paper has grappled with two divergent possibilities, the death of the Teacher, as an idea, and the potential afterlife of the teacher as an actor. As an actor the teacher continues to be trained, deployed, and put to work in spite of growing incredulity, or disrespect (interpersonal or institutional) that is shown towards the profession. If the urge to redeem education is to be resisted, or at least suspended, the problem becomes one of how education (as it has come to be) can be endured.

Notes

1. Within literary theory, of course, its influence has been inestimable. The essay is often read alongside Foucault's lecture 'What Is an Author' (Foucault, 2000). Texts indicative of its influence include Derrida's 'The Deaths of Roland Barthes' (Derrida, 2001); vehement dismissals by Burke (1992) and Keefer (1995) indicating the exhaustion and growing impatience of some within the field; the satirical re-reading of Carlier and Watts (2000), which amounts to the claim that Barthes surely could not have meant what he wrote; and more recent work seeking to inject new life into what had long become a 'theoretical commonplace' if not a 'theoretical cliché' (Gallop, 2011, pp. 1–2).
2. This needs to be qualified. Uneasy as Derrida (2001) may present himself to be over what he risks doing to his friend by writing about him in this way, fearful that writing of the dead (and the living) must necessarily always 'disfigure' if not further 'kill' them (p. 44), Derrida is also clear that Barthes must always escape any attempt to grasp him.
3. And this is in the sense that the Author fulfils, in part, the function of a (minor, but reassuring) God in bourgeois literature. The priority given to the Authorial voice, the transcendent perspective it adopts, its mastery of details, its production of a carefully constructed interiority, its soothing and sustained presence throughout the novel, and its comforting recycling of cultural assumptions, commonplaces, idioms, clichés, class sentiments, and everyday myths, has, of course, been long critiqued in literary theory, and in successive experiments to re-imagine the novel and place its narrator (and their world) in question.
4. This deflationary move, this about-turn to deflate the preceding argument, might seem a peculiar twist for a paper that has proceeded so far under the shadow of that idea, but it is a necessary move, firstly, to avoid monumentalising Barthes' essay, and secondly, to frustrate the desire for closure, the expectation that an academic paper shall cohere around a single argument, or offer a coherent point of view.
5. It is important to note that by 'writing' Barthes is not referring to all that has or might be written in the literal sense, but has in mind a kind of writing that does not banish polysemy, which does not serve the Law, and which sets off, as far as it can, towards distant and strange paradigms. Indeed, in another essay, Barthes considers bourgeois literature to be, in fact, a form of 'printed speech' (Barthes, 1986b, p. 154). Presumably this owes to the form of the conventional and commercially successful novel in particular, which is enslaved to the idea of connectedness, which is delivered in the form of a fully articulated narrative, with each sentence bound to what immediately follows or precedes, and which desires above all else to be *understood*, which means easily followed along lines that are already known, are familiar, secure, and comforting.
6. In other words, for all its permissions, it does not allow for interactions that are less determined (in the sense outlined by Bojesen, 2017), and that are more open, if not irreverent or ludic, that pay no regard at all to the mission of education, that draw attention, perhaps, to the continued and oppressive presence of the teacher, interactions that begin to refuse the management of conscience and good opinion, which

begin to suspect that dialogue is over-determined and contrived, and that good listening is a regulatory performance; a set of interactions that are, in consequence, and by their increasingly unregulated and experimental nature, potentially disruptive of those selves we have been educated to inhabit. The purpose of the teacher will be revealed here, as they are required to step in and restore the environment to their expectations.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

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