

Who has the final word? Literary theory, translation theory and translation practice

The translator could be described as a servant of two masters: the author and the reader. But is an author even the master of the meaning of their own words? And does the authority of the author depend on whether they have a ‘name’? French>English translator **Melissa McMahon** considers her current commercial translation practice in light of the literary theory she was taught at university.



It's fifty years since the publication in French of Roland Barthes' influential essay 'The Death of the Author', which challenged the idea that the author is the point of origin and final authority on the meaning of a text. According to Barthes, the myth of the Author—with a capital 'a'—is that the text expresses a set of ideas, feelings and visions that were originally formed in the mind of the author (the author as point of origin), and that deciphering a text means correctly reattaching the words to whatever the author had in mind (the author as final authority).

Against this, Barthes argues that the moment the author puts pen to paper, they enter into a network of meaning they do not own and cannot control—the writing itself is in charge. Writers themselves talk about this phenomenon: words 'get away from them', characters 'develop minds of their own'. For Barthes, this is not just

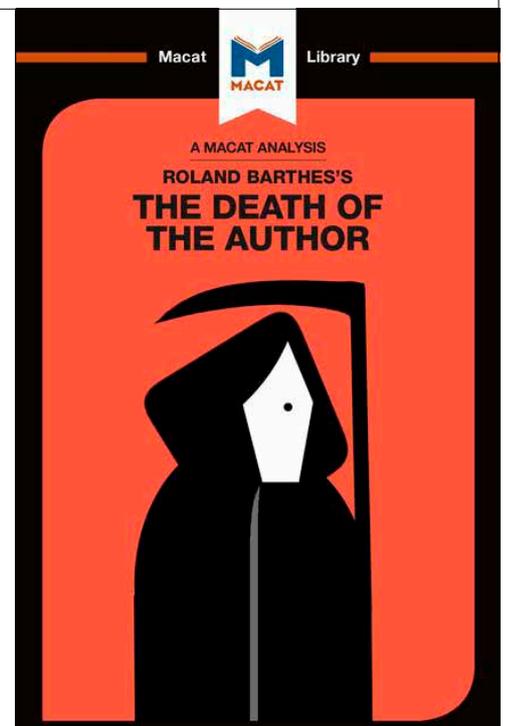
an anecdote about the experience of writing, but the essence of writing itself:

... 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.

I always think of this essay when I see references to Friedrich Schleiermacher's oft-cited theory of translation, the famous opposition between translations that 'bring the reader toward the author' and those that bring 'the author toward the reader'. For Barthes, unlike Schleiermacher, 'a text's unity lies not in its origin but its destination', which is to say with the reader. It should be noted, though, that for Barthes the reader—like the author—is as much a 'place' assigned by the text as a real person.

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Barthes' position is not just based on the idea that language trumps the language-user when it comes to meaning, but that the material reality of language is inseparable from any abstract idea it is supposed to convey. Language for Barthes, following Saussure, is a set of signs, each made up of a 'signifier'—the material element of language, spoken or written—and a 'signified'—the meaning we attach to the



sounds and letters. Just as the text is not simply a vessel for the intentions of the author, the signifier is not just a vessel for an intended concept: meaning itself is guided by the signifiers available to us; and what is the 'signified' itself, but another kind of signifier? Is there actually such a thing as a 'meaning' we can identify as separate from the word that means it?

Here we arrive back at translation again; this time, however, we're looking not at different philosophies or approaches to translation, but at the possibility of translation itself. The signifier—the letter on the page, the sounds that come out of a mouth—is exactly what is destroyed in the act of translating. What

makes a specific language a specific language, if not a certain shape and arrangement of words and sounds? The translator erases and replaces these with another shape and arrangement of words and sounds; and what is this process guided by, if not something like a 'signified' that we separate from the first and attach to the second? Sometimes, when engaged in translating work—spending whole days wiping out signifiers and gazing at signifieds in my mind's eye—I think about how I'm betraying my university lessons on the primacy of the signifier and the myth of the signified.

That's not to say that Barthes and his school are wrong. The whole difficulty of translation has to do with the problem they point out: how much meaning is bound to the particular weight and shape of a language, which draws in not just the formal properties of the word, but also the broader culture within which it's embedded. This problem is relative of course: the more a text deals with standardised concepts and objective processes, the more it looks towards a signified that can be isolated from the specific language that expresses it. At the opposite end of the spectrum is the literary text (and above all poetry), for which the whole aim is to upset standard ways of thinking and to strike intimate chords, exploiting the formal potential of the signifier.

We don't need to be translators of poetry, though, to have this experience of grappling with a signifier that has no obvious partner on the other side of the language divide. What does that experience consist in? Speaking for myself, there is a something—a shape or shadow, a movement, an aura ... a ghost?—that the source term 'gives off', and which I try to hold onto after whisking the term away. The 'mind's eye' is supposed to be a metaphor for a purely intelligible process, just as we talk about having a good 'nose' for meaning; but when the sensory metaphors pile up—when we talk about the 'feel', 'flavour', 'colour' or 'shade' of a term—should we start thinking of it as a kind of synaesthesia rather than conceptual association? There would still be a kind of signifier, some sort of sensible shape and arrangement rather than a pure abstraction, just not (yet) a linguistic one. As it moves closer to a target term, the ghostly presence becomes like the blur of a thousand words running past like shapes in a slot machine, stopping and starting until 'the penny drops'.



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In what sense are these experiences like the 'ideas, feelings and visions' the original author of the text might have had, and are we attempting to recreate them, consciously or unconsciously, when searching for a term? Barthes replaces the idea of an Author who precedes the text with the idea of a 'scriptor' who 'is born simultaneously with the text'. He replaces the idea that the text records a pre-existing meaning with the idea that the text performs a meaning in the here and now. There is still an author, but one whose identity is more put together by the text than vice versa.

One of the main differences, it seems to me, between literary translation and the kind of work that the commercial translator engages in lies in the presence or absence of this Author-with-a-capital-'a' hovering over the text, whether dead or alive. It is a truism that every text is written by somebody who could technically be referred to as its author, but are the nameless clerks who draft or redraft

a contract 'authors'? Are the nameless copywriters who produce the blurb for a medical brochure 'authors'? Not in Barthes' sense or indeed in Schleiermacher's, I think. You could say that in commercial translation, the figure that really hovers over the translator is not the Author, but the Client.

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above: Roland Barthes (1915–80) in his study, by Henri Cartier-Bresson, 1963
opposite page: cover image courtesy of Routledge (Taylor and Francis Group)