


Authors and writers a political distinction / *Escritores e escreventes: uma distinção política*

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ABSTRACT

For some time, we have seen various authors question the frontier that traditionally separated the literary texts from the conceptual texts. One of the most relevant authors in this regard is Roland Barthes. However, one of his most famous articles seems to contradict that idea. In *Authors and Writers*, Barthes seems to adopt this distinction to describe the production of texts. Authors are those who work the language itself, while writers are those who try to develop their thoughts without thinking about the language they are using. If that is true, language would be, for the writers, a mere tool for conveying ideas. In this article, we propose an alternative interpretation of those notions, more focused on the social roles of authors and writers. By doing that, we can better understand the figure of the author-writer, characterized by social exclusion. This analysis shows that the theme of writing is always accompanied by a reflection on its political nature.

KEYWORDS Barthes; Authors; Writers; Structure

RESUMO

Há algum tempo, temos visto autores negar a separação entre textos literários e textos conceituais. Um dos autores mais relevantes para esse tema é Roland Barthes. No entanto, em um de seus artigos mais famosos, *Escritores e escreventes*, Barthes parece adotar essa distinção para descrever o trabalho de escrita. Os escritores são aqueles que trabalham a língua ela mesma, enquanto os escreventes estão preocupados apenas com o desenvolvimento de um pensamento. A língua seria, para os escreventes, um mero instrumento de transmissão de ideias. Proporemos, neste artigo, uma outra leitura dessas noções, mais atenta aos papéis sociais que desempenham os escritores e os escreventes do que às diferenças linguísticas de seus trabalhos. Desse modo, poderíamos entender a aparição da figura do escritor-escrevente, caracterizada pela exclusão social. A análise dos diferentes estatutos do trabalho com a língua mostra-nos que os questionamentos sobre a escrita estão sempre relacionados a uma dimensão política.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: Barthes; Escritores; Escreventes; Estrutura

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1 Introduction

We have seen for some time the roles assigned to text changing places. The frontiers between conceptual texts and literary texts have become less clear by the day. It is known that a theater play, a novel, or a poem can be as reflexive as a philosophical text, if not more. There are countless examples of authors who, reflecting on their work, demonstrate that they were created to produce a certain impact in their readers, changing the way they see the world. The reverse process can also be observed: several authors have shown that conceptual texts are built from processes commonly attributed to literature. We know the classic text by Jacques Derrida, in which he shows how philosophy cannot be conceived without recurring to metaphors (s.d.). Bruno Clément (2005) argues that there is a narrative structure in the development of any methodical discourse. Pierre Bayard (2018), in turn, has developed a fictional literary criticism.

Nonetheless, we continue working as if certain texts could be instruments for communicating ideas. When we try to understand a notion developed by Roland Barthes, for example, many times we are tempted to simply define it. However, to do this, we would need to admit, on one hand, that this concept has coherence, that is, it is used in similar ways on different texts, and, on the other hand, that it can be used by other authors in other contexts to address other objects. This means that we act as if the concept was independent from the writing process that originated it.

This difficulty comes from our reading habits. We assume a central meaning in each text, as if the authors had tried to elaborate a message addressed to their readers. The reader must then simply decode it, trying to preserve its content as best as possible. Well, this would be equivalent to imagining that the main message could be conveyed with other terms. Interpreting a text is the same as explaining it from another discourse. Thus, we believe that by writing a text about another text, we are not doing anything other than saying, with different words, what has already been said by the author. The meaning becomes independent from its signifier: it can be covered with different languages, as if different texts could host the same message.

To work with a different way of reading, I aimed at studying literary criticism. It is the ideal genre to understand how the text produces a reflection. In principle, literary criticism is a purely metalinguistic activity. This means that it aims at describing an object from a language that encompasses it. In this sense, many times it operates in a way that is similar to what was previously described: it focuses on understanding the content of the text read and, then,

describing it with different words. Literary and criticism languages should thus be kept strictly separated: the metalanguage would not be narrative or poetic; it would have the purpose of translating certain aspects of the text as accurately as possible. However, as the metalanguage interacts with the literary text, it incurs in a contamination that has the criticism end up adopting certain characteristics of its object. I noticed that the metalanguage also told stories, invented metaphors, created characters. Such traits were not merely accessory: I sought to demonstrate that it would be illegible if we eliminated them. Thus, I demonstrated that it could be appreciated from the same instruments we use to understand the literary texts themselves.

From all the authors I consulted, Roland Barthes has been the most relevant, since he developed a practice that does not separate the ideas he proposes on the work of writing. This way, when trying to understand a notion proposed by him, the readers find themselves in an uncomfortable situation, because in general such notion continuously change meanings not only from one text to another, but often inside the very text where it is developed. The author forces us to choose: if we want to take ownership of his reflections to conduct our own work, we must produce a more or less arbitrary cutout of these ideas. When we use the notion of “writing,” for example, we first need to explain what writing we are talking about, that is, we must select, on the work, a specific use of the word. Conversely, if we aim at working with this notion in its multiplicity, we are subscribing to the continuation of the Barthesian writing: our activity will thus consist of inventing new meanings for it as we use. One way or another, the reader is forced to intervene.

From all notions developed by Barthes, however, one seems to be particularly ambiguous. It is the division between “authors” and “writers”. In a sense, the figure of the writer may invalidate the arguments we develop here. If read in a certain way, it legitimizes the idea of a purely instrumental text, capable of conveying concepts that are reproducible by other texts. To produce another reading of the terms, we need, first, to understand the idea of “writing.” Afterwards, we will closely read an article published originally in 1960, titled *Authors and writers* (BARTHES, 2013).

2 Writing



The term “writing” (*écriture*, in French, and *escrita* in Portuguese)¹ was used, in principle, in a very specific way. In *Writing Degree Zero* (BARTHES, 2004), published originally in 1953, writing is how certain authors position themselves before the literary tradition. Barthes presents it through dialectics that opposes the language and the style. The language is a “social object by definition, not by election” (p. 177). This means that the language works at the same time as a social dimension and as a “Nature” (p. 177). In fact, despite being the social object par excellence, it is something the author cannot modify: it is the limit that establishes the authors’ radius of action. On the other hand, the style is the individual side of the work: it is a product from the body and history of the author. It is related to their existential, intimate dimension, and for this reason it is a spontaneous trait of their activity. As an inseparable part of the personality, the style is not a choice: nothing can be done to change it.

The writing synthesizes both these dimensions. When writing, all writers and authors must dialogue with the mass of existing works. The literary tradition adopts a specific form of writing that serves the purpose of denoting the participation of a work in the literary tradition. When writing, all authors must adopt a position in relation to this tradition: they must decide whether they will part of the tradition or subvert it. This is the position Barthes calls “writing.” In this sense, it is, at the same time, individual and collective. It is individual because it is the particular position that a subject adopts in relation to tradition. It is collective because it is a political attitude, with the goal of modifying the tradition conveyed. The writing grants the author a choice. Opposite to style and language, it is an instrument of conscious action².

The notion of writing was profoundly modified in the course of the work. With time, it gained increasingly uncertain contours. Thus, there is no single definition that defines the meaning of the word “writing”. To think of it, one must abandon the idea of a clearly defined concept and adopt a reading that follows that successive trends and mutations of Barthesian texts.

3 Authors and writers

¹ Brazilian translations usually choose both “escrita” and “escritura” to translate the term “écriture”. According to Leyla Perrone-Moisés, however, both terms have a different meaning in Portuguese (2012). In the original version of this article, we used the term “escrita” because it has a more general meaning, encompassing activities from authors and writers. Since in English both terms can be translated as “writing”, this did not present an issue for the translation.

² For a genesis of the notion of writing, please refer to *Roland Barthes e seus primeiros toques de delicadeza minimalista* (TENÓRIO DA MOTTA, 2010)

Seven years after publishing *Writing Degree Zero*, Barthes wrote an article titled *Authors and writers*. Authors are distinguished from writers like a substantive is distinguished from a verb: the author has a *function*, while the writer has an *activity* (BARTHES, 2013, p. 32-33). The author has a function because he plays a certain role in the French society: he is the language's "priest", the "guardian" of the French language, defined by the author as "some sort of national treasure" (p. 35). His work, therefore, is intransitive: it has the language itself as an object. He doesn't use the language as an instrument to convey a message, but rather uses the language to work the language itself. The difficulties he faces are not social or existential: he is exclusively interested in how to write (BARTHES, 2013, p. 33). This attitude, however, has an unexpected effect, because the language cannot be rid of its reference: the linguistic work implies a particular questioning about the world. Absorbed in writing, he ends up finding again the interrogations he had avoided until then.

This indirect relationship with the world results from the structural character of the language. For Barthes, the structure of the word and the structure of the world are not overlapped: the author loses himself in the language and doesn't try to exceed its limits. For this reason, the author is incapable of producing a thought about the objects he addresses. Certainly, someone like Balzac has his own world view. However, as he writes a literary work, such view, which should provide answers about the society that surrounds him, becomes a question, because the language cannot describe the world perfectly: this way, we watch the spectacle of the writing confronting what it describes. Such mismatch makes the text no longer a cohesive answer given to a certain issue. It is thus converted into constant questioning about the limits of knowing. The function of the word "once it no longer is rigorously transitive is to neutralize the true and the false" (BARTHES, 2013, p. 34).

Writers, on the other hand, execute an activity because they try to act on the world. They have a transitive relationship with the language. Opposite to authors, the object of their operation is not the language itself. For them, the language is a work instrument: it is used to communicate a certain thought. Their goal is to teach or testify. To do so, the language needs to be transparent in relation to the objects that are being described by it. Far from placing the paradoxical structure of our knowledge onstage, the writer must put an end to an ambiguity in the world. His activity consists of proposing ideas, not a language: it is about communicating a thought that presents itself as pure and free. The thought is pure because it proposes ideas that do not depend on the vehicle that conveys them. It is free because it presents itself with no type of institutional framing.

Thus, one of the mythical attributes of the thought is its gratuity: ideas are seen as something that does not circulate as a commodity. For this reason, the writer does not respond to any type of demand from society: his duty is to tell others what they don't want to hear, because he indicates "the irrepressible nature of thought" (BARTHES, 2013, p. 37).

Formulated as such, the terms "author" and "writer" present an ambiguity. For allowing a real difference in the activity of both figures, it would be necessary for them to operate with two different languages. If we admit that the language structure is radically different from the world structure, we will be forced to admit that it has no descriptive function. Thus, every work with the language would be close to the author. On the other hand, if we believe that it can play a role of *instrument*, that is, of mere vehicle for a thought, its structure could only emulate the structure of the thought itself. In this sense, it is pure transparency, that is, it is capable of perfectly conveying a message. This message would never be, in this way, determined by the language's rules, but by a reflection that comes before it.

Well, if the language is nothing more than a package of thought, there would be no sense in working its structure as an independent object. From this moment, the writer's action would be reduced to a negligible game: far from producing ideas capable of describing the world, the author would be limited to a word play. In this sense, he would not be anything more than a negligible guardian of the "French word" (BARTHES, 2013, p. 35). He is limited to reproducing a myth of "writing well" (BARTHES, 2013, p. 35), which turns the language into a commodity of easy circulation.

Initially, Barthes seems to adopt both attitudes. At times, the writer appears in a degraded manner in relation to the author; the writer's communication project is "naïve" (BARTHES, 2013, p. 30) because he believes that his language is limited to what he "wants to say," that is, to his content. To this naivety, Barthes opposes the author's awareness, for he "perfectly knows that his word [...] inaugurates ambiguity" (p. 30). However, the author is easily palatable to the bourgeois order. Thus, "there is no author who one day will not be digested by the literary institution" (p.35), that is, any subversion he proposes will be finally retrieved and have its impact annulled. The writer's thought, on the other hand, is not easily palatable: his production of ideas, for not being supported by the literary institution, is hardly converted into a commodity. It is only through the author's work that the thought is integrated to the market's logic, because he has the function of "*transforming the thought (or conscience or scream) into a commodity*" (p. 37). Therefore, it is a dilemma: the author is the one who knows the nature of the language, but cannot use it in a

transformative way. The writer, on the other hand, does not know that his activity is determined by his language, but uses this ignorance as his means for operating in the world.

The distinction between authors and writers, therefore, does not include the language they use. There is not structural language on one hand and instrumental language on the other hand. In fact, the division occurs from two axes. The first one is conscience: the author is perfectly aware of the language opacity, while the writer is alienated in relation to his own activity. The second axis is the social function they perform: the author cannot disturb the operation of the bourgeois order, while the writer can achieve it because he stays at the margin of the circulation of commodities.

Both authors and writers are stuck to the roles society assigns them. We saw that authors act as guardians of the bourgeois language. Writers, in turn, despite the subversive role they play, contribute in a certain way to reinforce the mythical role of the intellectual in society, because his activity implies the idea that “the thought costs nothing, but it also does not sell itself, it is given generously” (BARTHES, 2013, p. 37). In other words, through his way of writing and the attitudes he takes, he ends up reproducing the notion that the thought is pure.

Well, once we admit that authors and writers use the same language, it is necessary to think about the statute of the writer’s writing. Just like the author, he must also select between submission or subversion of a certain model. This is why Barthes (2013, p. 36) states that he “has a writing common to all writers, a sort of *koinè*”. What characterizes writers, therefore, is not the absence of an utterance, but its unconscious acceptance.

Evidently, Barthes does not believe that this unconsciousness from the writer is an inescapable situation. In fact, both writer and author are anachronistic manifestations of the work with the language: both these roles no longer exist as such in contemporary society. On one hand, “superb authors” (BARTHES, 2013, p. 38) belong to the past: there is no one, in 1960, that takes the same role of names such as Victor Hugo or André Gide. On the other hand, it is no longer possible to ignore the linguistic nature of the writer’s activity. This is why he evokes the figure of the “author-writer”:

*We want to write something, and, at the same time, we write alone. In sum, our time would give birth to a bastard type: the author-writer. His function itself can only be paradoxical: it causes and conjures at the same time; formally, his word is free, subtracted to the institution of literary language, and, however, enclosed in this same freedom, it secretes its own rules, under the form of common writing; fresh off the literary men’s club, the author-writer finds a different club, the *intelligentsia* (BARTHES, 2013, p. 38).*

The author-writer is the one who can overcome some of the writing's unique difficulties. Contrary to the author, his text is not as easily retrieved by the bourgeois order because it is "free" thought, close to the writer's activity. This freedom, however, does not come from an alienation from the nature of the language: he knows that his activity depends on a "common writing" that makes its own rules. He is an ambiguous figure: even fully aware of the language's structural statute, he continues to collaborate with the myth of a pure thought, that is, one that develops regardless of this structure. Thus, he offers the dream of "a system-less communication" (BARTHES, 2013, p. 38), contributing, therefore, to maintaining a false conception on the intellectual work. His inclusion in the market is paradoxical: his texts have a certain mercantile character, because his works have some flow; however, he must be sheltered in marginal institutions, like the university, and is constantly accused of sterility (which means an exclusion from the production sphere).

Barthes approximates the function of the author-writer to the one Lévi-Strauss assigns to the sorcerer: "an outsider integrated by his own exclusion" (BARTHES, 2013, p.38). The exclusion is a necessary phenomenon because through it one can define the normality. The outsider is not, then, out of the society: on the contrary, he is an essential part of its operation. The subversion he conducts can never be revolutionary because it doesn't disorganize, but offers a representation of the edges of the collectiveness.

Authors and Writers thus does not question the structural character of the language. The language is never instrumental, the thought is never pure: each reflexive activity is a linguistic activity. Therefore, it is about reflecting upon the political role of the different methods of producing a text. We know that the notion of "writing" was transformed countless times throughout Barthes's career. However, what remained constant were the relationships between this notion and politics, because he always opposed the writing activity to a certain manifestation of the *doxa*. The *doxa* is the common opinion: pieces of language that repeat themselves and end up generating stereotypes (Barthes, 2014, p. 139-140). In principle, one could think that stepping away from the current opinion would be the attitude of an aesthete, who would simply try to distance himself from vulgar language. This opinion, however, would ignore the political character of the *doxa*. The *doxa* is repressive, because it tends to eliminate every discourse that does not conform to it (BARTHES, 2014, p. 140). For him, there is no separation between calling for political freedom and for linguistic freedom.

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