

Conversations with Barthes Prior to Committing Suicide

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This story takes place in black and white. Not the black and white of a Twilight Zone rerun, the hard colourless angles so startling after the filtered sepia tones of a McDonald's commercial. And not the black and white of false dawn; potential colours only, flattened into shades of grey. This is the black and white of colours so intense, so thick, so full that they shift out of red and blue and green, into a spectrum that has no room for anything but black. So more accurately, this story takes place in black and black.

Close your eyes; hold them shut till the last image has faded from your retina. This black. Squeeze your eyes tight, and ghost images intrude on the blackness, images so bright-black they hurt, and we would turn away if we could.

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Michel Foucault: 'The text always contains a certain number of signs referring to the author. These signs, well known to grammarians, are personal pronouns, adverbs of time and place, and verb conjunction' (204-5).

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He wakes from a dream; the dream has been in colour. He always dreams in colour-though he never remembers the dreams, only the colours. And he does not wake directly from the dream. He stops dreaming, going from REM sleep to deep sleep, a place without sight let alone colour, and from there he wakes.

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Roland Barthes: 'Linguistically, the author is never more than the instance of writing, just as I is nothing other than the instance saying I' (1988 169).

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He usually awoke with his radio alarm tuned to K-Oldies. Buddy Holly or the Big Bopper would return briefly from the dead to gently nudge him awake. He would shower, shave, brush his teeth, put on one of four suits in one of four shades of grey, and go to work. Sometimes he would stop at McDonald's on the way and pick up a Breakfast Burrito and an orange juice.

This morning (he could not tell if it was truly morning, or some hour of the night he had never visited before), he did not get up, did not shower or shave or brush his teeth. He did not put on one of four suits in one of four shades of grey. He did not go to work. He lay tangled in his sheets and stared at the night, having decided that it was indeed night. A night so rich in black that the air seemed thick with the colour, as though a fog made up of impossibly small droplets of black had seeped under his door. At the same time, the blackness stretched so far into the distance that his bedroom walls no longer seemed the solid barriers that they had been when he went to sleep.

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Roland Barthes: 'Ego always has a position of transcendence with regard to you, I being interior to what is stated and you remaining exterior to it' (1989 16).

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A gargoyle perched on his bedpost. Or it may have been a grotesque. I'm sure I learned the difference in school. Just as I learned the difference between stalactite and stalagmite. I was given a little phrase: 'Stalactites hold on tight and stalagmites grow with all their might'. But they never gave me a phrase for gargoyle and grotesque. I know it has something to do with

water flowing out of their mouths or not. But since this particular gargoyle (or grotesque) had his mouth closed and was perched on a bedpost, the point may be moot.

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Foucault has noted the relationship between pronouns, adverbs of time and place, verb conjunctions-and the author. Barthes the transcendence of the pronoun 'I' and its unique connectedness with the pronoun you. An explication of the pronouns in this narrative may tell us something, if not of the author, of the text, if not of the text, of the reader-and the distinction between these terms.

The first paragraph of this narrative contains no personal pronouns. Though this may simply be a rhetorical device, a disembodied not-voice reinforcing the surrealistic, the question arises, who is speaking? Author? Implied author? The protagonist?

Adverbs of time and place, which refer to an imaginary local identified in the opening sentence as 'This story' are of no help. 'Story' refers, not to a real place, but to a locus that is in flux, that takes on form only with the introduction of a pronoun, the second person you in the phrase 'close your eyes'. Yet, this you is too ambiguous to focus 'story'. Perhaps this is that artificial-intimate you found in some experimental fiction, an internal monologue which attempts to incorporate the reader. If this you is the reader, a new problem arises; the admonition, 'close your eyes', creates a situation in which reading can not occur.

The locus of 'story', never stable, shifts when you supplies its binary, an implied I, and changes to we in 'we would turn away if we could'. This we invokes both the impersonal, or royal we, and the intimate we which incorporates the implied I with the audience, and emphasises the external position of the reader first introduced by the imperative to 'close your eyes'.

The locus is drawn back into the text with the third person he, later identified as the protagonist. Interspersed as it is among the numerous pronoun shifts, this he, rather than solidifying the narrative on the protagonist, becomes as transitory as the other pronouns.

Any attempt at locating a narrative focus in the he is further problematised by the chatty I of the gargoyle section. Who is this I? How does the I differ from the he? From the I now speaking?

This fluid sliding of pronouns, rather than obscuring meaning, is revelatory, exposing in minute increments that this story is not about the protagonist (the he). If we would find meaning in this story, we must look, not to the protagonist, but to ourselves, reader and writer, and the tension between the pronouns I and you. Reference Barthes: 'I and you are reversible, I can always become you, and vice versa' (1989 16). We must look to the experience created within a text when these two pronouns merge in narrative, replacing the he; in many respects, this merging defines the author-reader dynamic.

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'Who are you?' he asked the gargoyle, surprised that he was not surprised to see such a creature perched on his bedpost.

'A gargoyle,' the gargoyle replied, then appeared to consider this statement for a moment. 'I think.'

'What's happening?' he asked.

'Nothing yet,' the gargoyle (or grotesque) replied in a granite voice. 'At one time the rules said that the story must begin with some action of the protagonist. However, we now operate under a new paradigm, which says the story must begin with some action of the reader. Under this paradigm, meaning may be embodied in you, but you have no body.'

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Dialogue confronts the difficulty theory has in addressing the proposition that the speaking subject speaks, not from a text, but from a body. Theory has so distanced the text from that body as to render the body's existence questionable.

Dialogue, by definition, originates in a body. Through it, metonymically, the knowledge that there is, or was a body remains. At the same time, theory, in distinguishing between the writer and the author, asserts that one is body and the other concept. Still, at some point we must ask ourselves, if the author is dead, what has become of the writer? Which is represented by the I and which by the he and what happens when the you of the reader is introduced to them?

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Snow started falling. Thick, soft flakes that hit the desk top and collapsed into clear pools of water, to slide noiselessly down the slope of the desk. They looked florescent in the blackness.

One landed on his cheek and dissolved into a slushy rivulet down his chin.

'What's this?'

The gargoyle appeared to examine the blackness with intense concentration. The snowflakes that landed on him clung to his granite surface without melting.

'Atmosphere.'

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Black. All visual images in this narrative are sucked into this colour that is not a colour, yet that embodies and includes all other colours.

At some point we must examine this use of colour. Are these colour images what Barthes refers to as 'insignificant notation' (1989 142), descriptors which have no purpose within the structure of the narrative? Is colour simply a part of setting, atmosphere, description? Or-as Barthes has made numbingly clear in S/Z, does, in fact, 'everything signif(y) something' (51)? Are colour images (those of sight, a function of the body) the first indication that a body exists behind, possibly within, the text-that the narrative, unlike the text, does not exist outside of a temporality conceived and perceived by a body?

Black is imbued with an excess of symbolic meaning in our culture. It is just such an excess that makes it useful as a metaphor for narrative. Extending the word black: 'black hole' provides us a complete metaphor for narrative. Colour, not colour, yes-yet, not a static image. Colour metamorphosing, in flux, within time and transcending time. Sucking everything up into it, or, recognising that within such a temporality it is simply impractical to differentiate between the colours which form it. Each individual colour undifferentiated from the other. Just as writer, reader, text, are distinct-yet become undifferentiated within the narrative.

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The snow melted. The blackness became complete.

A television flickered to life, breaking the blackness into intermittent reflections of its own grainy mirror of reality. Steve Allen sat comfortably in a swivel leather chair facing two men on a couch. Smiling at the camera, he spoke.

'I have with me today Roland Barthes and Michel Foucault, interestingly enough, both Frenchmen, and incidentally, both dead. So we're very fortunate to have them here tonight to discuss the death of the author with us.' He swivelled his chair to face the older man. 'Let's start with you, Dr Barthes. What is the significance of the author to current theoretical thought?'

Barthes cleared his throat and spoke slowly, as though choosing each word with care.

'The explanation of a work is always sought in the man or woman who produced it, as if it were always in the end, through the more or less transparent allegory of the fiction, the voice of a single person, the author "confiding" in us' (1988 168).

'I take it this isn't what's really happening,' Steve Allen suggested.

Barthes nodded. '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' (1988 168).

'I'm afraid you've lost me there,' Steve Allen said, turning to the camera and chuckling in a comfortable, self-deprecating way, as though to assure any viewers who were also lost that any reasonable person would be. He turned back to Barthes. 'Of course, your most famous statement, Doctor Barthes, is that the author must die. Why is that?'

Foucault answered, and though Barthes fidgeted, he seemed content to allow him to speak for both of them. 'This relationship between writing and death is...manifested in the effacement of the writing subject's individual characteristics. Using all the contrivances that he sets up between himself and what he writes, the writing subject cancels out the signs of his particular individuality. As a result, the mark of the writer is reduced to nothing more than the singularity of his absence; he must assume the role of the dead man in the game of writing' (198).

Steve Allen smiled. 'That's very interesting. Now, I'm afraid it's time for a word from our sponsor.'

The television sputtered, then went blank as some inane jingle for some fast food restaurant attempted to dissipate the darkness.

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The protagonist was no longer in bed. He stood in line at McDonald's. He blinked in surprise at a colour that wasn't black. His eyes soon adjusted to the filtered sepia tones.

He was naked, though no one seemed to notice. The employees and patrons wore identical smiles of delight on their faces. An inspiring jingle perfectly complimented the sepia tones.

'This doesn't look good,' the gargoyle, perched on the 'Fresh Salad' cooler said.

'What doesn't?' the protagonist asked. He found the presence of the gargoyle reassuring.

'He's getting desperate.'

'Who?'

'The Author. Better do something soon. He feels as though he has lost his agency. He requires you to give him meaning.'

'Isn't he the one in charge? Isn't he writing this?'

'At one time, within the confines of the story, he was God. Or was it within the confines of reality, God was author? That's why he (the author, not God) started writing in the first place, to make of himself the speaking subject. Now he's not even sure if he will exist after the text is completed. If something doesn't happen soon, he may revert to nihilism.' The gargoyle shook his head stiffly. 'That isn't a very pretty sight.'

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Roland Barthes: 'The birth of the reader must be at the cost of the death of the author' (1988 172).

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The door to the McDonald's opened and a man in camo, carrying a gun, stepped in. The protagonist supposed the gun was an AK47.

'Yes, it is,' said the gargoyle. 'You should have done something.'

'What?' He yelled. It wasn't as though he hadn't tried. He didn't know what was expected of him—a typical post-modern dilemma. He wasn't sure who he was—character, author, reader. He wasn't sure, if he died, who would die with him. He wasn't even sure whose thought that was.

The delighted smiles never left the faces of the employees and patrons as one by one the man in camo blew their brains into pulpy purple and grey abstract patterns on the otherwise spotless tile wall.

He blew the gargoyle's head into dust and pebbles, then turned the gun on him.

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Headline: Gunman Kills 17 In McDonald's

A lone gunman shot and killed seventeen people in the McDonald's on South 820 this morning. An eighteenth victim survived the shooting, but remains in critical condition. His name is being withheld pending notification of his relatives. (Details on pg. 6).

Works Cited

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