

The Author is Dead. Long Live the Author!

Gašper Troha

University of Ljubljana
gasper.troha@guest.arnes.si

Although the 1960s and 1970s brought about explicit declarations of the death of the author (Barthes) and sought other concepts to replace it (e.g. Michel Foucault's authorial function), the author survived. Where does our inability to locate and define an author of literature come from? My hypothesis is that an answer can be found through analysis of the heterogeneous nature of our subject, to be more precise, in an analysis of his/her two roles - empirical author and author as a function who is, according to Foucault, located on the threshold of a text or a discourse.

*The paper deals with two autobiographical texts by the Slovene writer Lojze Kovačič - descriptions of the author's experiences in primary school as he described them in novels *Basel* and *Otroške stvari* (*Childish Things*).*

Keywords: literary theory / author / authorship / autobiography / autobiographical literature / Kovačič, Lojze

UDK 82.0:808.1

821.163.6.09-312.6Kovačič L.

Introduction

Roland Barthes declared the death of the author and shifted the attention to the role of the reader in 1968. His statement was just one of the most famous results of an ongoing crisis of the romantic concept of an author, which has changed our perception of literary texts to a certain point, but failed to erase the author completely. Tomaž Toporišič has taken this crisis of an author as the starting point of his analyses of the playwright's role in the theatre of the 1980s and 1990s. Although the playwright seemed to be obsolete and although the dramatic text could be written by performers themselves, so-called post-dramatic texts (for instance texts by Elfriede Jelinek and Sarah Kane) brought about renewed popularity of playwrights and thus of the author. In his own words, "the playwright has survived again and again the chain of his/her own crises, and has at the same time found himself/herself in an unbearable position between expressions 'to end' and 'to begin'" (Toporišič 269). Where does

this vicious circle of endings and new beginnings stem from? Is it a consequence of the heterogeneous nature of our subject? To be more precise, of its two roles: 1) the empirical author, and 2) the author-function, which is a part of a discourse or is set at its threshold?

At the end of his paper “What is an Author?” Michel Foucault proposed some directions for future research.

Is it not possible to re-examine, as a legitimate extension of this kind of analysis, the privileges of a subject? Clearly, in undertaking an internal and architectonic analysis of a work [...] and in delimiting psychological and biographical references, suspicions arise concerning the absolute nature and creative role of the subject. But the subject should not be entirely abandoned. It should be reconsidered, not to restore the theme of an originating subject, but to seize its functions, its intervention in discourse, and its system of dependencies. (314)

Foucault thus advocates that we should analyse an author both in his/her empirical form as well as in his/her role inside a discourse. My analysis will deal with two fragments of autobiographical novels by Slovene author Lojze Kovačič. They both describe his first encounters with educational system when he entered alimentary school in Basel. The first novel, entitled *Basel*, was written from February till April 1983 and the second one *Otroške stvari* (Childish Things) in March 2003. The choice of autobiography is on the one hand due to the fact that it presupposes the strong role of an empirical author and, on the other, that it ensures a more or less invariable story. Differences between the two texts should thus show the role of an author-function. The results of our analysis should give ground to further exploration of an autobiography and reliability of it, and at the same time pose questions about the role of empirical author in non-autobiographical fiction. Before we start dealing with both texts, however, we have to explain our choice, which rests on the features of autobiography.

The Fictional and Pragmatic Nature of Autobiography

Although there has been an ongoing debate on how to define autobiography in the generic sense and there have been different terms proposed – from autobiographical fiction or literature to the novel as autobiography (see Koron) – I will use the term autobiography as a designation of different kinds of texts in which “a protagonist speaks himself about his own life” (Leben 84). Both Alenka Koron and Andrej Leben, who are trying to install autobiography in a system of literary genres, stress a mixture of fiction and reality, fiction and non-fiction ... as its main feature. It comes as no surprise

then that *Leben* suggests a method of empirical literary science to be the most suitable for analysing autobiography as it gives special attention to the empirical author as literary producer as well as to his relationships to literary protagonists and narrators (literary post-processing) (*Leben* 89).

In our case, of course, the author, narrator and protagonist are basically the same person in different roles inside literary discourse. The empirical author's experience stays the same although we might have to consider the possibility that a change in the author's attitude towards his past can also change his memory or experience that is imprinted on it. The narrator-protagonist is invented by and for each text separately and is thus probably on the threshold of a literary discourse. It creates it, but at the same time it is a part of it and is hence modified by it. In this sense an autobiography is especially suitable for our purpose as it seems that both authorial roles that are of our interest are very much evident and accentuated in it. We should thus be able to come to a somewhat clear image of them, their features and limits.

Basel

Lojze Kovačič was born in Basel to a Swiss mother and Slovene father. His father refused Swiss citizenship and his family was hence deported back to Yugoslavia in 1938. The novel *Basel* describes the author's first return to his home city in 1972, after 36 years of exile. He wanders around and visits numerous houses where his family lived, streets and edifices that marked his childhood, and his sister Margrit who stayed in Switzerland and never left the city. The novel was written in 1983 and published six years later.

An interesting fact that one notices right at the beginning is an unusual switch in the narrator's perspective. The novel starts and finishes with a first-person narrator, which is common in autobiographies; however, in *Basel* the narration almost instantly shifts into a third-person one, creating a distance between the narrator and the protagonist regardless of the temporal proximity of the action. This gives the impression of an objective narrator who states the facts and could explain protagonists' feelings, actions etc., but as the story unfolds we realize that only the author's feelings and thoughts are being described, whereas with other protagonists the narrator limits himself to descriptions of their actions. In other words, the choice of a third person narrator makes for an autobiographical narration that would presuppose a first-person narrator and an impression of quasi-objectivity.

The second thing, which probably stems from existentialist and modernist narrative patterns, is the frequent use of ellipsis, which results in strands of observations and pieces of memory that remain unexplained and at the same time seem more authentic.

In a fragment about his elementary school the narrator goes to the most traumatic points of his experience immediately after the first description of the place. The latter is in complete contrast with the fact that he was first transferred to the front row because he could not learn anything; later even his family could not teach him and finally he was transferred to the *Hilfsschule* (a class for children with special needs).

Place de l'Etoile. Look, there is only a small, pink and washed up sacred-profane building with two small towers left from that huge red-brick school that looked like a gothic cathedral with two towers where a small bell was announcing intermissions. (*Basel* 169)¹

His memories end as abruptly as they started when the protagonist and his companion leave the place and are back to their reality. *Basel* is like a pile of impressions from the past and present that have no order or perspective, but nevertheless create the author's identity, upon which he reflects on the train while travelling back to Yugoslavia. He asks himself: "From which experience have I learnt something? And which are those that will stay and be the basis of my repentance?" (*Basel* 187)²

The answer to these questions were sought by Lojze Kovačič in his last project – two novels *Otroške stvari* (Childish Things) and *Zrele reči* (Mature things) where he tried to draw the line under his life – which was unfortunately interrupted by his death on 1 May 2004.

Childish Things

Childish Things is the last novel written by Lojze Kovačič. He finished it in March 2003 and only two months later it was published with Academic Press in Ljubljana. Although the description of his elementary school and his first days in it is three times as long as in *Basel*, the story is practically identical. There are a few inconsistencies, e.g. in *Basel* he mentions two schoolteachers in the *Hilfsschule*, in *Childish Things* only one; in *Basel* he does not describe the loss of his new satchel, and in general he adds more details in *Childish Things*. Nevertheless, our perceptions of the two fragments differ because of the way they are told.

The most obvious distinctions are: 1) the consistent first-person narration, and 2) the chronological and causal plot in *Childish Things*. In other

words, the author's late novel is closer to traditional autobiography as "a protagonist speaks himself about his own life" (Leben 84) and shows us an image of the world that tries to be whole. No wonder, since Kovačič called his last novel *Postscript I*, thus indicating that he probably wanted to round up his life experience and come to some conclusions.

A more subtle, but probably also more a powerful distinction between the two fragments is the fact that in *Childish Things* Kovačič uses a set of metaphors and indications to announce the future events and to present the protagonist's own feelings. The fragment hence starts with a hairdresser and his father giving him a haircut and changing him into someone he does not know. Excitement at the first day of school mixes with a glance of *Hilfsschule* and the feeling that he is confined to the institution against his will:

This was already my third involuntary arrival in a foreign institution, but my aversion really started with this last one. They took us in twos to the side wing in front of the doors in a hallway where there was another untidy door that led to the Hilfsschule attended only by imbeciles and cripples and had an entrance from the side street by wooden stairs. (*Otroške* 126)³

This impression of confinement becomes more accentuated as he cannot learn anything and the community gradually excludes him. He thus starts missing school and going to the Rhine River. He can let his imagination loose again and he feels free from the restraints of the society, but at the same time he realises he will never be able to be a successful part of it. Although he realises that beauty and money distinguish people one from another he knows that "this wish will never come true, even when I am hundred years old and seriously ill" (*Otroške* 139). The exclusion finally manifests itself in his banishment from a normal class. Although frightened and humiliated he finds his means to survive by scaring off other kids during intermissions. At the end he also describes his return to Basel and his disappointment when his old school, the object of his traumatic experience, turns out to be no more than a single-storey building.

An Author and His Roles

It is tempting to infer from what has been described that one should distinguish the two roles of an author. First, an empirical author with his/her memory that is being described and is thus more or less invariable, and second, an author-function that arranges a particular text or discourse. In our case the empirical author, Lojze Kovačič, describes his traumatic memory of alimentary school in Basel, however, he does that each time

through a different approach. In *Basel* he wants to record his impressions as he would like to observe whether he has changed in these 36 years of exile and perhaps notice the roots of his destiny; in *Childish Things* he seems to have all the material set and he is editing it, looking for causes and consequences, writing his chronology in such a way that it would finally make sense.

However, this last statement warns us against our first assumption. Clearly, without an intention of empirical author or authors there can be no production of text. Furthermore, with a traditional way of writing – I disregard here modern experiments with so called authorless texts written by text algorithms – an author has to choose the basic parameters, such as a form of narrator, of narration, etc.

Auto poetic texts are probably the most reliable way to investigate this theme, so let us look at one of them by Lojze Kovačič. It is entitled *Literatura ali življenje* (Literature or Life) and was written on a theme that was discussed at the Vilenica literary festival in 1995. Kovačič, among other things, gives us two main reasons for his writing. “First: to express my misfortune. Second: to find an appropriate form that might fit chaos.” (*Literatura* 31)⁴ Immediately he continues with his credo:

There is a conviction that I have had from the first day of my writing, thus I could say I am writing under its dictate. The conviction that *literature should never be ashamed of itself before life*. And that *bad literature should* – especially if one is its author – *always blush before good* [literature]. (*Literatura* 31)⁵

Lojze Kovačič thus not only described his own memories in his work but also tried to find an appropriate form that would fit chaos, i.e. life. In other words he wanted to introduce some order and round up his existence. He tried to do that in *Childish Things*, more precisely in an unfinished project of *Postscript I and II*. According to this, one might say that the empirical author is not only the source of literary material but also the one that defines the basic parameters of a narration (narrator, protagonists, general artistic orientation). However, at this point we are already at the threshold of a discourse. As we have shown in an analysis of both fragments, the choice of a narrator and thus a point of view is crucial for their differences. The choice of a third-person narrator and modernist technique of narration in *Basel* results in its objective and distanced atmosphere, whereas a first-person narrator who foretells the tragic destiny of the author using narration patterns of realism probably creates a stronger emotional impact on a reader. At the same time we have to acknowledge the author's remark that he searches for the right form to suit his existence and that the quality of his work cannot be predicted and directed.

Following Foucault we can say that an author's function in our case is to choose a subject and the basic parameters of a narration. With the latter he already intervenes in a discourse; however, he is also dependent on an author-function which starts with the same intervention and works inside the discourse and abiding its own rules. The result is thus unpredictable, even more so when we also take a recipient's response into account. Kovačič describes these dependencies in a following way.

You face them [readers] and they question you mercilessly – why have you eased the pain or covered the mess with an epithet, adjective or only with a choice of expression – and thus you realize again and again that both writing and reading stem from the same impulse. It is not enough to write a good book, you should write your heart out and let all your stars burn in flame. (*Literatura* 27)⁶

But all these questions which we usually address to the empirical author should actually be directed to an author-function as a choice of particular words is probably as, if not actually more, dependent on the rules of a discourse itself.

Should we then repeat, following Barthes, that “we know that to give writing its future, it is necessary to overthrow the myth: the birth of the reader must be at the cost of the death of the Author” (Barthes 148)? One could think of a machine or even a person who writes according to set rules and facts. Articles from press agencies would probably make for a fine example. Of course we can argue that this set of rules has also been set by someone or a group of people who can thus be considered empirical authors, but still we have to admit that such kind of subjectivity is less noticeable, if we can notice it at all. In spite of this, Barthes's inference is wrong. Dependence on the empirical author is even used by Kovačič, and here we have to agree with him, to defend literature against modern electronic media:

Behind every incident there has to be a human being who reshapes it in himself, in his dreams and consciousness, chemically, architectonically, to define its gravity in its nucleus and cover. Everything else that we cannot reshape in the depths of our being, doesn't touch us and stays on the outside, just a piece of information, a deserted stubble field, which spreads further with every following piece into the far distance and indifference. (*Literatura* 12)⁷

Not only the empirical author is dependent on the author-function, on language and recipient's response; it is also the language, a piece of information, a recipient and hence an author-function that is dependent on the empirical author. We can thus speak of interdependence that should be at the core of our interest.

Conclusion

I realize that my paper raises more questions than provides answers. The analysis should further investigate the role of an empirical author in a non-autobiographical fiction, in fiction written by a group of authors, changes that might occur with translations where different rules of the destination language and recipients' expectations might play an important role etc. All these have to be left for some future occasion as I would like to conclude by answering my original question.

Where does the recurring crisis of an author stem from? Is it a consequence of a heterogeneous nature of our subject?

As our analysis has shown the answer is positive. The recurrence of the crisis of the author is a consequence of its very nature. As neither an empirical nor author-function are complete in itself we tend to discard one of them as redundant and obsolete, but, as they are absolutely dependent on each other, we can never get rid of either of them completely. Doubtlessly their proportion varies from text to text, genre to genre – in the case of autobiography one might say that the empirical author has a dominant role – and they overlap at the threshold of a discourse, which further complicates the matter – but this does not make our work impossible. One should go to the other extreme and compare literature with machine generated texts in order to define the limits of an author-function, find the degree of an empirical author that changes such texts into literature and, of course, to further test the interdependence of our two roles.

Nevertheless, at this point we can conclude that an awareness of a fact that an author has a heterogeneous nature can prevent us from going to extremes – declaring his/her death or praising his/her genius – and urge us to investigate the complexity of positions that are or could be created in the middle.

NOTES

¹ Translations from Slovene by Gašper Troha.

“Place de l’Etoile. Glej, od velikanske, gotski stolnici podobne šole iz rdečih opek z dvema stolpoma, v kateri je mali zvon oglašal odmore, je ostala samo nekakšna majhna, roza izprana sakralna-profana bajta z dvema turenčkoma.”

² “Iz katerih izkustev sem se nekaj naučil? In katera so, ki so se odbrala, da bodo podlaga mojemu kesanju?”

³ “To je bil že moj tretji prihod v tuji zavod, v katerega sem moral, a moj pravi odpor se je zares začel šele tukaj. Odvedli so nas v dvostopih v stransko krilo, pred vrata na hodniku, kjer so bila na koncu še ena, zanemarjena vrata, za katerimi je bila pomožna šola,

ki so jo obiskovali sami bebci in pohabljeni in v katero se je prišlo iz stranske ulice po lesenih stopnicah.”

⁴ “Prvi: da izrazim svojo nesrečo. Drugi: da bi kaosu našel formo, ki bi se mu mogoče prilegala.”

⁵ “Eno prepričanje me preveva od prvega dne pisanja do danes, tako da lahko rečem, da že ves čas pišem pod njegovim diktatom. Prepričanje namreč, da *se literatura nikoli ne sme sramovati pred življenjem*. In da *mora slaba literatura* – posebno kadar si jo zagrešil sam – *venomer zardevati pred dobro*.”

⁶ “Iz oči v oči se soočaš z njimi, neizprosno te povprašujejo po vsem – zakaj si nekje z epitetom, adjektivni ali zgolj s tonom pridušil to ali ono nesrečo ali godljo – in tako vsakokrat znova zveš, da tako branje kot pisanje izhajata iz istih pobud. Ni dovolj, da spišeš samo dobro knjigo, marveč da si tudi izpišeš srce iz prsi, da pustiš, da zagonijo vse tvoje zvezde.”

⁷ “Za vsakim pripetljajem mora biti zmeraj človek, ki tak dogodek predela v sebi, v snu in budnosti, kemično, arhitektonsko, da precizira njegovo težo v jedru in lupini. Vse drugo, česar ne moremo predelati v globini svojega organizma, se nas ne dotakne in ostaja zunaj nas, zgolj informacija, pusto strnišče, ki se z vsako nadaljnjo informacijo širi v nedogled in vseenost.”

WORKS CITED

- Barthes, Roland. “The Death of the Author.” *Image, Music, Text*. London: Fontana Press, 1977. 142-148.
- Foucault, Michel. “What is an Author?” *The Art of Art History*. Donald Preziosi (ed.). New York: Oxford University Press, 1998. 299-314.
- Koron, Alenka. “Avtobiografija, fikcija in roman: o možnostih žanra, roman kot avtobiografija.” *Primerjalna književnost*. XXVI. 2 (2003): 65-86.
- Kovačič, Lojze. *Basel*. Ljubljana: Cankarjeva založba, 1989.
- — —. *Literatura ali življenje*. Ljubljana: Študentska založba, 1999.
- — —. *Otroške stvari*. Ljubljana: Študentska založba, 2003.
- Leben, Andrej. “O avtobiografiji z vidika sodobne genologije in sistemske teorije.” *Primerjalna književnost*. XXX. 1 (2007): 83-95.
- Toporišič, Tomaž. *Ranljivo telo teksta in odra*. Ljubljana: MGL, 2007.