

## The Death of an Author

Hengameh Saroukhani,

Sarah Lawson Welsh, and Michael Perfect

What does it mean to critically examine a writer's life, her work, and the relationship between the two? As literary critics we work within and at the limits of distinctive paradigms and structures of interpretation. A text often takes on a new life as it is distilled through a critic's analytical pen and as it is embedded within specific intellectual traditions. But what are the assumptions that constitute our methods of interpretation? Roland Barthes' notion of the "death of the author," for example, continues in some ways to dominate literary studies. It is now instinctive to grimace at the thought of placing a writer's intentions at the heart of any form of criticism. How might we retain our autonomy as critics if we relinquish the labour of interpretation to the seemingly incidental whims of the personal life and intentionality of the writer? If we agree with Barthes that it is a mistake to treat authorial intention as *the* source of a text's meaning, might we maintain nonetheless that it should be considered *a* source of such meaning? If we are to make the case (as we surely must) for a multiplicity of sources of literary meaning, how might we go about negotiating and calibrating these sources when we undertake literary analysis?

We have asked ourselves these questions many times while co-editing a special in memoriam issue on Andrea Levy over the last two years, published in the pages of *ARIEL* in 2022 (53.1–2). Engaging with her legacy through new critical approaches, her archives, and her unpublished works provoked us to dwell on the process of interpretation itself. We were keen to curate a publication that would radically contextualize her work and stand as a material articulation of Levy's global significance. (This is why we chose to publish with a Canadian rather than British journal.) Our contributors grappled with the difficulty of writing

about Levy in the aftermath of her passing. Andrea Medovarski, for example, meditated on her own mother's death alongside Austin Clarke's as a means to understand the psychic constitution of her comparative approach, while John McLeod drew from his personal experience of adoption to enunciate the complex acuity of Levy's writing on the politics of adoptive being. In writing about Levy after her death, we have noticed something shift in the scholarship (not just within Levy studies and, by extension, postcolonial studies). The personal has become a key discursive terrain of contemporary scholarship. The personal is not just political here; it's critical.

Bill Mayblin, Levy's widower and partner for over forty years, wrote a short accompanying text to "Two," a stunning meditation on death and mortality that was probably the last piece of creative writing Levy ever produced and which was published for the first time in our special issue. He drew attention to how the piece was immediately part of an archive; it was "quickly handwritten in a Moleskine notebook" (311). He does not know why she wrote the piece; thus, he movingly yearns to know her intentions: "Was she trying to confirm, or alternatively to question, her feelings about her life and her impending death? Was it therapeutic, or was it an anxious questioning?" (311). These intimate questions return us to some of the foundations of literary studies and, consequently, bring us to Mayblin's most recent work, "Speaking from Memory: Thoughts and Recollections from a Life with Andrea Levy." In thinking about his position as Levy's partner, Mayblin offers an example of how scholarship can be shaped by the personal. "The role of a long-term spouse or partner to an author," Mayblin argues, "is an informal and generally undocumented one. It can encompass the roles of confidante, interlocutor, research assistant, secretary, personal assistant, first reader, editor, close observer, and companion" (136–37). Mayblin reminds us of an acutely under-explored genre within literary scholarship: the archival knowledge, intellectual paradigms, expertise, and revelations proffered by the writing of those close to an author and her work. It is a modality of scholarly labour that is embedded in both the archival and personal realms. Mayblin's distinctive scholarship marks a

shifting interpretative terrain that values the intentionality of the writer, the context of her work, and an understanding of her impact through a language of intimacy. It is a form of scholarship, we suggest, that challenges the conventions of our discipline.

Mayblin's piece sheds new light on how Levy's work was influenced by her experiences, what she hoped to achieve in and through her writing, her views of various adaptations of her novels, and why certain themes—lineage, adoption, and (un)belonging in particular—recur throughout her oeuvre. Yet in bringing to bear so effectively its unique insights into Levy's life, views, and character, Mayblin's piece does not attempt to "correct" other accounts of her work. It employs a particular mode of analysis—an especially intimate form of biographical criticism—but does not seek to preclude other such modes. Rather, it engages in productive dialogue with the articles curated in our special issue, deliberating on, extending, and sometimes contending with their arguments. For one thing, this is simply good critical practice. For another, it is in keeping with the spirit of the body of material under discussion: one key characteristic of Levy's work, our special issue suggested, is its dialogic quality.

In Barthes' seminal essay, the "death of the author" refers to a figurative event that, as he sees it, allows readers to escape the "tyrann[y]" of authorial intention and thus become creators rather than merely passive receivers of meaning (143). But authors are not just constructs; they are also human beings for whom death is a very real event. In addition to mourning, their literal deaths tend to prompt critical reappraisals of their work. In curating a special *in memoriam* issue on a major writer who had died so recently, we were forced to wrestle with authorial death in both the figurative and literal senses. We hoped to pay tribute to one of the most significant writers of her generation; to place her writing within broader analytical frameworks than had thus far been the case; to critically document the proliferation of her output across various media; and to explore the relationship between her life and her work without framing the latter as a mere fictionalization of the former. Ultimately, we hoped to inaugurate a critical conversation that we decided to call "Levy

studies.” Mayblin’s piece marks a major contribution to that field, and we are delighted to see it in print. The conversation is very much alive.

### **Works Cited**

Barthes, Roland. “The Death of the Author.” *Image, Music, Text*, translated by Stephen Heath, Fontana, 1977, pp. 142–48.

Mayblin, Bill. “Accompanying Text to Andrea Levy’s ‘Two.’” *ARIEL: A Review of International English Literature*, vol. 53, nos. 1–2, 2022, pp. 311–12.