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“The Death of the Author” (1967-1968) by Roland Barthes. Author (Authority) = God

Biography Roland Gerard Barthes was born in Cherbourg on November 12, 1915 and died in Paris, on March 25, 1980). He taught and wrote about semiology, linguistics, sociology, philosophy, music, wrestling, fashion, and photography. A few key words: readily and writerly, punctum and studium, symbolized and signified, author and scriptor.

Introduction From “Pierre Menard, Author of Don Quixote” by Jorge Luis Borges (Fictions, 1941)

“It is a revelation to compare Menard's Don Quixote with Cervantes'. The latter, for example, wrote (part one, chapter nine):

. . . truth, whose mother is history, rival of time,
depository of deeds, witness of the past, exemplar and
adviser to the present, and the future's counselor.

Written in the seventeenth century, written by the "lay genius" Cervantes, this enumeration is a mere rhetorical praise of history. Menard, on the other hand, writes:

. . . truth, whose mother is history, rival of time,
depository of deeds, witness of the past, exemplar and
adviser to the present, and the future's counselor.”

History, the mother of truth: the idea is astounding. Menard, a contemporary of William James, does not define history as an inquiry into reality but as its origin. Historical truth, for him, is not what has happened; it is what we judge to have happened. The final phrases—exemplar and adviser to the present, and the future's counselor—are brazenly pragmatic.”

Summary Barthes starts with Balzac's description of femininity and sensibility of a castrato disguised as a woman. Barthes questions Balzac's voice in the story: who is speaking? Is it Balzac the individual or Balzac the Author? Is Balzac a product of his time or is this “a universal wisdom”? When we write, Barthes explains, we are no longer ourselves, “[w]riting is the destruction of every voice, every point of origin.” In traditionally oral (or ethnographic) societies, the audience admires the shaman or the storyteller's performance, but not his or her genius.

Historically speaking, the Author [Author = Authority = God] was born in the Middle Ages, and grew with the English empiricism, French rationalism, the personal faith of the Reformation, the positivist individualism, and finally capitalism. The Author is a tyrant. His or her life explains their work of art of literature. For Barthes, criticism tries to limit the text by giving the text an Author: when the Author is found, then the text is explained.

When speaking of the act of writing, Barthes refers to the contributions of Mallarmé, Valéry, Proust, the Surrealist movement, and linguistics to conclude that the Author is death. To Mallarmé, language speaks, not the Author. Valéry sided with “the verbal condition of literature.” Proust based his life on his book. The surrealists believed on automatic and collaborative writing. Linguistics stated at the time, “the Author is never more than the instance writing... language knows a ‘subject’ [as in a grammatical subject], not a ‘person.’”

Temporality changes when the Author is removed. If we think about the Author, there is a before and after the book. If we think about the text only, it becomes an eternal entity, it is always here and now.

The text is never original, since it is a tissue of quotations and imitations taken from the language and the culture that the scriptor (modern writer) and the reader share. The reader is who provides the text with meaning and unity. The reader has no history, biography, psychology, etc. Barthes ends his essay as follows, “the birth of the reader must be at the cost of the death of the Author.”

Discussion: --Philosophy and –isms --Literary criticism, Iser --Don Quijote --Influence

Questions:

1. Can the reader really hold the unity of the text?
2. Is it possible for the reader to decode the tissue of all meanings of a text?
3. Can the act of writing become just another automatic skill that can be sealed or copied, like putting your shoes on or typing?