

Author, Text, and Reader: Death of the Author and Meaning of the Text

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This paper is going to explore Roland Barthes, Michel Foucault and Wolfgang Iser's theories upon the question, death of the author, from three aspects comparatively: What is the connotation of the author in their understandings respectively? Why is death of the author necessary in modern or postmodern period? What will take the author's position after its death? Through detailed analysis and comparison of their texts and propositions, this paper attempts to indicate that Barthes advocates that textual meaning is within text itself, dispels author's conclusiveness on meaning of a text, and suggests the openness and multiplicity of textual meaning. By reexamining the writing subject and redefining the function of author, Foucault indicates that the concept "author" is a function of discourse. He degrades author's crucial significance in the process of textual interpretation, but keeps author as an existential mode of discourse. Wolfgang Iser states that the meaning of a text generates from the reading process, a dialogue between the text and its reader. Once a literary text is finished, it remains quite and full of potentialities, waiting for reader to unfold itself, waiting to realize itself in reading process.

Keywords: death of the author, writing, mechanism of discourse, reading process

Introduction

Where can we find the meaning of a literary work? Should we seek it in the author, the creator of work? Does it exist within nowhere but the text itself? Should we pursue it in mechanism of discourses (How discourses exist)? Or does it lie in the reading process, in readers' imagination? From the end of 19th century, death of the author has been an emerging and rising trend in the field of literary theory and literary criticism ever since Nietzsche proclaimed "death of the God". In 1930s, the school of New Criticism cut off the connection between the author's intention and the interpretation of literary works through raising the question of "intentional fallacy" and highlighting scientific methods of poetic evaluation. In 1950s, structuralism treated writing and text as the game of symbols, and emphasized that the text is nothing other than spontaneous plays of language and symbols. In 1970s, the post-structuralism highlighted "textuality" and "intertextuality" and regarded the author's intention as the obstacle for textual interpretation. All those theories share a common interest to against the authority,

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against the only and holy way of interpretation, and pursue a free space for multiple and diverse interpretations.

Roland Barthes: Nothing Is Outside the Writing

Roland Barthes states that there is nothing outside writing. The meaning of literary text is internal not external in the activity of writing since “the enunciation has no other content than the act by which it is uttered” (Barthes, 1999, p. 149). Barthes indicates that literature is nothing but writing. “A text is made of multiple writings, drawn from many cultures and entering into mutual relations of dialogue, parody, contestation...” (p. 150). However, it has been a convention that critics seek meaning of a text from its author, which is regarded as the only original and correct meaning. Therefore, the author has to be ended in order to unfold free, multiple and diverse interpretations of given texts.

The author, in Barthes’ understanding, refers to the individuality of the person, namely, “his person, his life, his passions”. The author is conceived to exist before the text and give birth to his text. “The author is thought to nourish the book, which is to say that he exists before it, thinks, suffers, lives for it, and is in the same relation of antecedence to his work as a father to his child” (p. 148). However, the individual author is a modern concept which emerges since the Renaissance. He is the product of modern bourgeoisie and comes into being on the basis of humanism and individualism. The author plays a role as the father to his text, and as “the God” whose intention requires to be fully respected. The individual author has brought a serious problem to textual interpretation, “to give a text an Author is to impose a limit on that text, to furnish it with a final signified, to close the writing” (p. 148). Therefore, for Barthes, there is a necessity to get rid of the author in order to realize free interpretations.

Barthes puts the author to death from five aspects. First, he strongly believes that literature is not the creation of the author, but writing—“All writing is itself this special voice, consisting of several indiscernible voices, and that literature is precisely the invention of this voice, to which we cannot assign a specific origin...” (Barthes, 1999, p. 147). Second, the author is a modern figure who emerged because there occurred a need for its relationship with the text, and the modern scriptor will bury the author since the connection between the author and the text has changed. Third, there is no such an origin of any text because a text is “a multi-dimensional space in which a variety of writings, none of them original, blend and clash... a tissue of quotations drawn from the innumerable centers of culture” (p. 149). A text is generated from the space created by those previous texts, not from one particular person. Four, Barthes can’t accept the existence of author because he regards writing as an open and dynamic activity while an author will close the writing and turn it into a closed and referential activity. The last one, Barthes replaces “author” with “reader”. On one hand, the subject of writing is not the traditional author expressing his own intentions, but readers; the author is also a reader because his work is to explain and translate words in a “ready-formed dictionary”. On the other hand, a text is composed by multi-dimensional writings, from diverse cultures, and these multiplicities lies in reader, not the author.

Barthes firmly advocates that textual meaning is within text itself, dispels author’s conclusiveness on the meaning of a text, and suggests the openness and multiplicity of textual meaning. However, Barthes’ theory has two shortcomings. One, it neglects the diversity and initiatives of individual authors. Even though unconsciously influenced by literary traditions, “ready-formed dictionary” in Barthes words, individual authors do exert their own negative capacity on them. Two, he ignores author’s intention as one important or possible interpretation (even though not the only correct one) among those multiple meanings.

Michel Foucault: The Mechanism of Discourse Matters

Michel Foucault, in "What is an author?", intends to reexamine the privileges of the subject, especially the author as a writing subject. Michel Foucault believes that meaning of literary works lies in the mechanism of discourses although he acknowledges the existence of subject (author) in a limited sphere. In another word, he degrades the significance of author in the process of seeking textual meaning, deprives the author's authority, and highlights the discourse's modes of existence. "Perhaps it is time to study discourses not only in terms of their expressive value or formal transformations but according to their modes of existence" (Foucault, 1999, p. 185). Though Foucault doesn't eliminate "author" completely as Barthes does, he does weaken the significance of "author" in the process of textual interpretation.

Foucault concludes that we need an author as a writing subject after analyzing the relationship between works and their authors and that between writing and the author. We must examine the name of author and "author function", not merely "repeat the empty affirmation that the author has disappeared" (Foucault, 1999, p. 177). The author's name has three functions: one, it assures a classifying function by putting different texts under certain names; two, it establishes a kinship among various texts since texts written by the same author always recognized with relevance to each other; three, "it serves to characterize a certain mode of being of discourse", as long as that mode of discourse exists, the concept author will live. Therefore, "the author function is characteristic of the mode of existence, circulation, and functioning of certain discourses within a society" (p. 178). Foucault concludes four major characteristics of author function:

(1) the author function is linked to the juridical and institutional system that encompasses, determines, and articulates the universe of discourses; (2) it does not affect all discourses in the same way at all times and in all types of civilization; (3) it is not defined by the spontaneous attribution of a discourse to its producer but, rather, by a series of specific and complex operations; (4) it does not refer purely and simply to a real individual, since it can give rise simultaneously to several selves, to several subjects-positions that can be occupied by different classes of individuals. (Foucault, 1999, p. 182)

After examining the name of author, author-function and founder of discursivity, Foucault suggests that the author is a certain functional principle by which, in our culture, one limits, excludes, and chooses, he is "the ideological figure by which one marks the manner in which we fear the proliferation of meaning" (Foucault, 1999, p. 186). Hence, we can conclude Foucault's attitude towards "author": the existence of author as the writing subject is reasonable; the author's functions as a functional principle by which discourses unfold; the only and holy meaning of author does not exist.

What will take the place of "author" or "author-function" if they die with the change of society, or change of the existential mode of discourse? The concept author is put to death by two factors: one, "writing has freed itself from the dimension of expression"; two, "writing has become linked to sacrifice, even to the sacrifice of life" (Foucault, 1999, p. 175). What if the "author-function", as a functional principle, becomes unfit to society? Foucault implies at the end that another mode of discourse will emerge once "author-function" disappears:

I think that, as our society changes, at the very moment when it is in the process of changing, the author function will disappear, and in such a manner that fiction and its polysemous texts will once again function according to another mode, but still with a system of constraint—one that will no longer be the author but will have to be determined or, perhaps, experienced. (Foucault, 1999, p. 186)

Foucault reexamines the writing subject and redefines the function of author. He degrades author's crucial significance in the process of textual interpretation, but keep author as a discourses' mode of existence. The title "What is an author?" suggests that Foucault regards author not as an individual person. Instead, he indicates that the concept "author" actually is a function of discourse. The God-like figure is gone, but the functional principle remains. However, Foucault remains the same question as Barthes—he also neglects the individuality and diversity of different authors.

Wolfgang Iser: The Text Is Realized in the Reading Process

Wolfgang Iser states that the meaning of a text generates from the reading process, a dialogue between the text and its reader. Meaning is not created by a singular factor such as an author, a reader, the text itself, or even the structure of discourses, but by the text and its reader together in the reading process. According to phenomenological theory, "one must take into account not only the text but also the actions involved in responding to that text" (Iser, 1999, p. 189). Iser admits author's role in creating literary text and the diversity of different authors, at the same time, he reduces the significance of author's intention in the process of textual interpretation. Once a literary text is finished, it remains quite and full of potentialities, waiting for reader to unfold itself, waiting to realize itself in reading process.

Iser distinguishes literary text and its realization as two poles: the artistic pole referring to literary text created by the author, and the aesthetic pole referring to the realization accomplished by the reader. As for literary work, it can't be "completely identical with the text, or with the realization of the text, but in fact must lie halfway between the two" (Iser, 1999, p. 189). The convergence of the text and reader brings life to literary work. The literary work is more than just a text—something abstract between the text and reader's response to it.

The meaning is generated from the reading process. "It is the end product of the interaction between text and the reader" (Iser, 1999, p. 190). The literary text is full of potentiality because on one hand, the author is required to leave enough gaps while composing the text in order to arouse reader's anticipations and leave space for reader's imagination; on the other hand, the written part of any literary text can't fully express its intention due to the indeterminacy of language. The reader is full of anticipations when he meets with the text, and he will exert his imagination to fill those intentional blanks during reading the text. The finished reading will influence the ongoing reading for what he has read sinks into his memory, becomes retrospection, and forms a different background (p. 192). Reading process leads to the realization of literary text. One literary text is "potentially capable of several different realizations, and no reading can ever exhaust the full potential, for each individual reader will fill the gaps in his own way, thereby excluding the various other possibilities..." (p. 193). Therefore, there is no one and only meaning in the text. The potentialities of the text are much richer than those meanings of its any single realization.

Iser believes that meaning is realized through the act of reading and how a reader connects the structures of the text to their own experience. The author leaves blanks consciously or unconsciously while composing the text. Therefore, the written part of the text forms a clue leading to the unwritten part. Once the text is written, the author is gone by passing his task (the realization of the text) to the coming reader. With anticipation, the reader unfolds his reading process and exerts his imagination to fill those blanks and choose the meaning of the text himself. The retrospection of the finished part will influence the ongoing reading by forming a background.

When the reader comes to a possibility of realization, one meaning comes into being. Iser admits author's work in writing the text and acknowledges his intention as written part and intentional gaps. He cuts off the author's functions once the text exists, and hands down his mission to the reader who will unfold reading process, during which meaning generates and the realization of the text accomplishes.

Conclusion

Where does meaning of a literary text lie? A traditional view believes that the meaning of text lies in the author who created it. His personality, his moods, his intention all affect the interpretation of the text. Barthes argues that the individual author has to die if we want a free and open space for multiple and diverse interpretations of the text. Modern scriptor will bury the author and its position will be taken by modern reader. Meaning is within the text (writing) itself. However, he neglects the individuality of the author and the author's meaning as one possible interpretation of the text. Foucault suggests that the author is not a concrete person, but a concept, the existential mode of discourse. The writing subject is necessary but deserves reexamination, and it changes along with the change of the existential mode of discourse. The author-function will disappear some day once the certain mode of discourse changes, and the text will again follow another function, another mode of discourse. He leaves a space for the author but deprives the author's creativity. Iser indicates that reading process is the realization of literary text and generation of textual meanings. The author passes his mission (seeking the realization of the text) on to the reader once the text is written. It is a dialogue between the text and the reader, during which the reader interprets the text and the text influences the reader.

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