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Citationality and Authorship in Barthes and Borges

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'It is language which speaks, not the author' (Barthes)

Roland Barthes's 'The Death of the Author' (1967) and Jorge Luis Borges's 'Pierre Menard, Author of the *Quixote*' (1939), though generically distinct, are considerably thematically aligned. Putting these texts into conversation, and exploring their relations, will thus prove mutually illuminating, providing a useful Barthesian theoretical vocabulary in which to articulate Borgesian ideas, as well as creative Borgesian dramatisations which bring to life Barthesian theory. Moreover, close comparison will not only reveal rewarding similarities, but also differences—moments of divergence and development that deepen and complicate one's understanding of the ideas in question. Accordingly, this essay, following a brief introduction to 'The Death of the Author', will argue that Barthes's theory and Borges's fiction are closely aligned in their perspectives on literary influence, originality, and authorship. Moreover, it will argue that Borges's short story, exceeding the narrowly proto-Barthesian, develops and complicates such ideas to a significant extent, unpacking the psychological ramifications of influence, as well as imagining the various other ways in which the idea of authorship may be challenged.

'The Death of the Author' presented a seminal critique of the traditional conception of literary authorship, desacralising the author and undermining notions of authorial authority in the process. According to this essay, the author had traditionally been understood as a sort of 'Author-God' : a single voice, originating and determining the meaning of a text (143). In contrast, Barthes argues that literary texts are multivocal, citational, and indeterminate, thus rendering the traditional conception of the author obsolete. In other words, texts are so resonant with the echoes of other texts, so haunted by the intractable signifying power of language, and thus so fragmented by a multitude of possible meanings, that any notion of an original, determining voice is impossible. In addition to the citational fabric of literary language in which a writer formulates their experience, even that experience itself cannot constitute an origin of meaning. Inverting the traditional concept of mimesis whereby art

mirrors life, the essay sees a writer's inner life as mirroring art, meaning the thing they might wish to "express" is already citational—undermining the possibility for originality even more (143-144). The author is thus defunct and desacralised. Intention becomes irrelevant, unauthoritative, and cannot encompass the true semantic range of a text. As such, we must learn that 'it is language which speaks, not the author' (142), and thereby dig the author's grave. The author dead, all we are left with is the 'scriptor' (143)—an amalgamator of proliferating discourses and citations who traces 'a field without origin' (143), an infinite regress of influence. Having dispensed with the Author-God and originality, Barthes also (naturally) attacks biographical criticism (142, 144). Ultimately, he recentres the reader in literature—the only place a text can find 'unity' (144), the 'one place where [...] multiplicity', the proliferation of meaning, 'is focused' (144).

Jorge Luis Borges's short story, 'Pierre Menard, Author of the *Quixote*', is considerably aligned with Barthes's perspective on influence and originality. Like 'The Death of an Author', Borges's story sees the literary text as 'a tissue of quotations drawn from innumerable centers of culture' that traces 'a field without origin' (Barthes 143). The eponymous hero of the story, for instance, publishes 'symbolist' poetry in a review called '*La Conque*' (89), the name of which tacitly figures poems as conch-like insofar as they are shaped by, and echo with, a sea of influence—'innumerable centers of culture' (Barthes 143). Moreover, Menard's 'transposition into alexandrines of Paul Valéry's *Cimetière marin*' (89) forms a humorous hyperbole of the literary text inasmuch as it is only a rearrangement of its influences, a 'tissue of quotations' whose only power is 'to mix writings' (Barthes 143). That said, unoriginal citationality is most humorously evoked by Menard's '*oeuvre nonpareil*' (90)—his inimitably imitative transcription of (parts of) Cervantes's *Don Quixote* as though it was his own work (90-91). Significantly, Menard's 'intention' to arrive at *Don Quixote* 'through the experiences of Pierre Menard' (91), which implies an attempt to paradoxically

reconcile overwhelming influence with originality, is comically undercut by the fact that ‘*the experiences of Pierre Menard*’ are already quintessentially Quixotic—defined by futile, fatuous (intellectual) quests, such as the one under discussion. ‘Pierre Menard’ thus anticipates Barthesian notions of inverse mimesis, whereby ‘life never does more than imitate the book’ (Barthes 144), meaning that Menard’s interiority and experience, rather than representing a last redoubt of originality, are also fundamentally citational, each ‘a ready-formed dictionary’ (Barthes 144) of culture and discourse.

This said, Borges’s story often exceeds the Barthesian. For instance, ‘Pierre Menard’ explores the psychological ramifications of the citational, derivative nature of literature for the writer, a subject on which ‘The Death of the Author’ is relatively lacking. This is perhaps a product of genre, a short story permitting a broader imaginative and emotional range than a theoretical essay—the specific generic conventions that each text is “citing” thus delimiting what each can say about citationality. Barthes’s post-Author author, the ‘scriptor’ (143), is more of a reconceptualisation of authorship than an examination of the psyche of the modern writer. As such, the ‘scriptor’ is characterised as placidly resigned to his condition, comprehending the impossibility of self-expression and originality, and conceiving of himself as merely channelling and shaping ‘a field without origin’ (143). Menard, in contrast, embodies a more psychologically complex response to citationality and influence. He cannot placidly accept his derivativeness, and instead attempts to distance himself from his predecessor, expressing his ‘forgetfulness and indifference’ of the *Quixote* (92), and thus positioning his transcription as enigmatically original. Moreover, he denigrates Cervantes (94), and depicts his own endeavour as ‘much more difficult’ (94), thus positioning his transcription as somehow superior. As such, in Borges’s story, we see a writer who is chafing against the reality of derivativeness, painfully aware of it, but not willing to accept it—a figure far more complex than Barthes’s ‘scriptor’, and (strange to say) far more realistic.

Given their alignment on questions of influence and originality, ‘Pierre Menard’ and ‘The Death of the Author’ also significantly align in their perspectives on authorship. Both work to desacralise the idea of the author, undermining traditional notions of authorial originality and authority. In addition to depicting the author as a figure who ‘can only imitate a gesture that is always anterior, never original’ (Barthes 143), as I have outlined above, ‘Pierre Menard’ also undermines the idea of authorial authority, prefiguring the Barthesian notion that ‘it is language which speaks, not the author’ (Barthes 142). Thus Menard, given his comic-heroic tendency to ‘anticipate the vanity that awaits all the labours of mankind’ (94-95)—pre-empting it, as it were—appears to ‘anticipate’ this dilemma too. He establishes a ‘resigned or ironic habit of putting forth ideas that were the exact opposite of those he actually held’ (93), as though even trying to harness to intractable, quasi-autonomous signifying power of language was futile. The authority of the author to determine meaning is thus whimsically undercut.

‘Pierre Menard’, however, extends ‘the desacralization of the image of the Author’ (Barthes 142) much further than ‘The Death of the Author’, exploring various other ways in which the author may be seen as unauthoritative. For example, ‘Pierre Menard’ suggests that the author may be regarded as metaphysically non-necessary to his oeuvre. Thus, Menard, speaking of his project to arrive at the *Quixote* through his own experiences, observes that “[t]he task I have undertaken is not *in essence* difficult [...] If I could only be immortal, I could do it” (91-92). Here, Menard is suggesting something akin to the infinite monkey theorem: if he (or an infinite-monkey, for that matter) grappled with his typewriter forever, eventually, he might just arrive at the *Quixote*. This implies that, theoretically, an author is not *necessary* to his work, as anybody, even a monkey, could (in theory) circumstantially pre-empt him.

Aside from this stimulating though nebulous thought-experiment, ‘Pierre Menard’ also undermines authorial authority by depicting reader and historical context as powerful organs of meaning-making. Unlike Barthes’s idealised reader—the passive ‘space on which all the quotations that make up a writing are inscribed’ (Barthes 144)—Borges’s readers are active participants and sculptors of meaning. The texts they consider—Cervantes’s *Quixote* and Menard’s *Quixote*—are linguistically identical, yet yield entirely different meanings due to reader-response and the historical contexts in which they were produced (93). On one hand, one could see these readers as the biographical critics Barthes laments, seeking the ‘*explanation* of a work [...] in the man or woman who produced it’ (Barthes 142), and becoming lamentably unmoored from the text in the process. On the other hand, the critic-narrator’s ‘new technique [...] of deliberate anachronism and fallacious attribution’ (95), whereby one may ‘read the *Odyssey* as though it came after the *Aeneid*’ (95), for instance, playfully suggests something of the ‘enrich[ing]’ (95) meaning-making power of reader-response and historical context. Something that, in embodying a source of meaning independent of the author, powerfully undermines authorial authority.

Barthes’s ‘The Death of the Author’ and Borges’s ‘Pierre Menard, Author of the *Quixote*’, then, are considerably thematically related. They both see influence and citationality as essential aspects of literary culture that undermine notions of originality. Likewise, they both work to desacralise the idea of the author, attacking the notion of originary power and authorial authority. That said, Borges often exceeds the proto-Barthesian, developing and expanding concepts significantly. This can be seen in his exploration of the psychological tensions of influence and originality, as well as in his examination of various other ways by which authorial non-authority may be configured. Ultimately, close comparison of these two texts has proved mutually illuminating, allowing

for the elucidation and elaboration of shared ideas—ideas with significant implications for modern creativity, language, and literary theory.

Works Cited

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