Is the Author "Dead" Already?

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ABSTRACT:

This essay is to argue that the "race" of artists called "the author" actually has never "died" and will never become extinct; it only suffers continuous "metamorphosis" as its status and function vary with the changes of social milieu or cultural conditions. This argument contains four sections. The introductory section points out the rhetorical nature of theory and criticism and suggests that literary theorists or critics necessarily use rhetorical devices such as metaphor and metonymy to discuss the problem of whether or not the author is "dead." The second section gives a historical survey of how the author has been changing his status and function in Western thoughts. The third section describes the author's situation as he faces the rise of our contemporary literary theories. This section implies that "the death of the author" has become a compelling theme in our era. The final section discusses whether or not the author can be "dead" at any time, and brings forth the intended conclusion.

KEY WORDS:

author, dead, rhetoric, metaphor, metonymy, status, function, theory, criticism, metamorphosis
I. The Rhetorical Nature of Theory and Criticism

Our era is witnessing a booming market of literary theories and a flourishing business of critical trade. As commerce is practical, rather than theoretical, our critical industry tends naturally to meet competitions more by finding fault with others than by playing fair games. Thus, our theory-mongers or criticism-traffickers are often (intentionally) blind to their own shortcomings, and they often claim their insight, if any, to be the only valuable insight. They forget that any theory is but a partial truth at best, not a universal law. They also forget that any critical act is but a matter of sheer rhetoric, which is an art employed to persuade others by verbal means, not necessarily to lead them to a comprehension of any absolute truth.

Rhetoricians recognize two basic rhetorical devices: metaphor and metonymy. But the two devices are used not only by orators (as in the past) or authors of literature in the narrow sense of the word (poetry, drama, fiction, etc.) but also by literary theorists or critics, who theorize about literature or criticize literary works. Consider, for instance, the two statements below:

1. "The birth of the reader must be at the cost of the death of the Author." (Barthes, 148)
2. "The author-function is ... characteristic of the mode of existence, circulation, and functioning of certain discourses within a society." (Foucault, 148)

In the first statement, Roland Barthes talks about the "birth" of the reader and the "death" of the author. Yet, we know "birth" and "death" here are but metaphors: they do not refer to the acts of coming into existence and ceasing to be, respectively. From their context we know they refer, rather, to the fact that in determining the meaning of any text, the reader cannot gain his importance until the author loses his dominating place, just as the son must eventually replace the father in terms of authority in the natural course of birth and death. In the second statement, Michel Foucault is talking about the function of an author. Yet, here by "an author" he does not mean the originator of a literary work or some literary works. Instead, he means the author's name, which, according to his argument, "does not pass from the interior of a discourse to the real and exterior individual who produced it," but "manifests the appearance of a certain
discursive set and indicates the status of this discourse within a society and a culture" (147). So, he is here talking about the author metonymically, using part of an object (the author's name) to represent the whole object (the entire author with his name, body, life, works, etc.).

The above two examples show clearly that literary theorists or critics, no less than creative writers of literature, must of necessity make use of tropes (figures of speech) from time to time to state their ideas. This fact naturally links theory and criticism, as well as literature, to the discipline of rhetoric—a fact Paul de Man has demonstrated convincingly in his *Allegories of Reading*.

II. The Historical Statuses of the Author in the West

Concerning the author, Western thinkers or writers have had all sorts of their say. But just as pointed out in the foregoing section, whatever they say about the author is always tinged with rhetorical purposes and devices. We may well divide those thinkers or writers into two camps: the detractors-plaintiffs and the extollers-defendants of the author, based on consideration of whether or not they talk about the author favorably. (In doing so, we are using tropes ourselves.) Furthermore, we may regard them as judges of the author's historical statuses, determining with their power of discourse the "birth, life, and death" of that species of men and women whom we most generally call "the author," "the artist," or "the writer," but sometimes more particularly call "the poet," "the playwright," "the novelist," "the essayist," or any other name pertaining to a specific genre of literature.

Now, let us discuss the matter in detail. As is well known, Plato was a great detractor of the poet. The poet in his mind was, of course, not exactly the kind of poet in our mind today. The poet, as he conceived, actually referred more to either an epic writer or a dramatist than to a lyricist. Anyway, the kind of author called "the poet" was for Plato not a trustworthy person. In *Ion* he records Socrates as saying that "the poet is a light and winged and holy thing, and there is no invention in him until he has been inspired and is out of his senses, and reason is no longer in him" (14-15). Although the poet is here regarded as a "holy thing," he is said to be "out of his senses" when he is inspired. Later, in *The Republic*, we know, the poet is further disparaged as an inferior imitator (as he only imitates imitations), a liar (about gods), and a bad influence (whose poetry "feeds and waters the passions instead of drying them up"). Thus, the poet was
for Plato a dangerous person pedagogically, metaphysically, ethically, and politically. He was therefore sentenced to be banished from the philosopher's ideal state, if not to "die" in it.

After Plato's banishment sentence, there followed a succession of defendants trying to "legitimate" the poet's stay in any state. Plato's disciple Aristotle admits in his Poetics that "Epic poetry and tragedy, comedy also and dithyrambic poetry, and the music of the flute and of the lyre in most of their forms, are all in their general conception modes of imitation" (48). But, unlike Plato, he did not debase artistic imitation. He thought, instead, that "Imitation ... is one instinct of our nature" (50). And his analytical explanation of poetical genres, especially tragedy, implies that the poet is a creator of forms, an artist in the sense that he is able to make such "parts" as "plot, character, diction, thought, spectacle, and song" cohere into a form worthy of its genre.

The idea of imitation gains a second sense in Horace's Art of Poetry. For both Plato and Aristotle, imitation means "imitation of nature or real life." For Horace, however, a trained artist's imitation can mean not only "to take as his model real life and manners" (73), but also to "thumb well by night and day Greek models" (72). Thus, the author becomes an imitator of other writers as well as of life and nature. Besides, as Horace proposes that the aim of the poet is "either to benefit, or to amuse, or to make his words at once pleasant and give lessons of life" (73), he is suggesting that the poet is both an entertainer and an instructor. And as the entire Ars Poetica is full of guiding principles for a writer's craft, it implies that Horace regarded the artist as a craftsman, rather than as a creator.

Longinus might be the first known expressive theorist of literature in the West. In his On the Sublime, he holds that "sublimity is the echo of a great soul," and that "the truly eloquent must be free from low and ignoble thoughts" (81). For him, therefore, a great poet is a person with elevation of mind and is capable of "forming great conceptions" and producing "vehement and inspired passion" (80). Thus, in his view the author is an expresser of his own soul, not a mere medium who utters the Muse's words when he is possessed.

The neo-Platonic philosopher Plotinus believes that the beauty of the artist's creation lies not in any physical object that it copies, nor in any matter that it shapes, but in what the artist imposes on his materials. The arts "give no bare
reproduction of the thing seen but go back to the reason-principles from which nature itself derives, and, furthermore, that much of their work is all their own; they are holders of beauty and add where nature is lacking" (106). In contrast to Plato, he considers the artist a creator of vehicles of valuable, spiritual insight into the One, which is "a unity working out into detail" (109).

Renaissance men were mostly defenders of the author. In defense of the poet, for instance, Boccaccio argues that "however he may sacrifice the literal truth in invention, [the poet] does not incur the ignominy of a liar, since he discharges his very proper function not to deceive, but only by way of invention" (131). Moreover, as fervid and exquisite inventors, poets are not merely apes of the philosophers, but "should be reckoned of the number of the philosophers, since they never veil with their inventions anything which is not wholly consonant with philosophy as judged by the opinions of the ancients" (134). Finally, Boccaccio even claims that the pagan poets of mythology are theologians since "they clothe many a physical and moral truth in their inventions" (135).

For Scaliger, "the poet depicts quite another sort of nature, and a variety of fortunes; in fact, by so doing, he transforms himself almost into a second deity" (139). Another Renaissance scholar, Castelvetro, does not regard the poet so highly as Scaliger does. Nevertheless, he also speaks for the poet because he concludes that "poetry is conceived and practiced by the gifted man and not the madman, as some have said, for the madman is not able to assume various passions, nor is he a careful observer of what impassioned men say and do" (152).

The Puritan Stephen Gosson reverted to Plato's unfavorable attitude towards poetry. In his *School of Abuse*, he treated the poet as one of "the caterpillars of a commonwealth," a waster of time, a mother of lies, and a nurse of abuse. It was to answer such attacks that Sidney wrote his *An Apology for Poetry*, in which besides rebuffing Gosson's points, he avers that the poet is in fact a moderator between the philosopher and the historian, "the food for the tenderest stomachs," and "indeed the right popular philosopher" (160-61).

In the Neoclassical Period, important literary figures such as Boileau and Pope followed basically the classical idea of the author as a craftsman whose art it is to imitate nature and classical writers and plan and polish his work with pains. This idea is of course refuted later by Romantic writers. Edward Young, for instance, thinks of the artist as an original or a man of genius, who has "the
power of accomplishing great things without the means generally reputed necessary to that end" (341). William Blake also believes in the poet's genius. And for him genius is always connected with the power of arousing inspiration, imagination, or vision. In contrast, William Wordsworth tries to play down the idea of "genius." He tells us that the poet is but "a man speaking to men" (437). But with the addition that the man, however, is "endowed with more lively sensibility, more enthusiasm and tenderness, who has a greater knowledge of human nature, and a more comprehensive soul, than are supposed to be common among mankind ..." (437), he actually maintains that the poet is an extraordinary man, if not a genius. In truth, Wordsworth carries not only the expressive theorist's view that "poetry is the spontaneous overflow of [the poet's] powerful feelings" (441), but also the pragmatic view that the poet is "the rock of defense for human nature; an upholder and preserver, carrying everywhere with him relationship and love" (439).

In 1820, Thomas Love Peacock published a satirical treatise titled "The Four Ages of Poetry," aiming to ridicule his romantic contemporaries. This satire, however, brings forth the idea that poetry has been evolving in a cycle of four ages: iron, gold, silver, brass. And this idea of evolution consequently suggests that the poet suffers historical changes, too. In the iron age, poets are only rude bards celebrating "in rough numbers the exploits of ruder chiefs ..." (491). In the golden age, poets are "the greatest intellects" such as Homer and Shakespeare. In the silver age, poets can be either imitative or original, but such figures as Virgil and Pope mostly try to recast the poetry of the age of gold by giving an exquisite polish to it. Then in the brass age, poets like Nonnus and Wordsworth are but semibarbarians in civilized communities because they "take a retrograde stride to the barbarisms and rude traditions of the age of iron, professing to return to nature and revive the age of gold" (494). Such poets can be "splendid lunatics" or "puling drivelers" or "morbid dreamers" (496).

Peacock's satirical attack on poetry meets a vigorous answer in Shelley's *A Defense of Poetry*. In this vigorous defense, poets become institutors of laws, founders of civil society, inventors of the arts of life, good teachers, prophets, and unacknowledged legislators of the world. Indeed, for Shelley a poet is sometimes like a nightingale "who sits in darkness and sings to cheer its own solitude with sweet sounds" (502). And sometimes a poet is like an Aeolian lyre, capable of making music in response to outward influences. But always a poet, "as he is the author to others of the highest wisdom, pleasure, virtue and glory,
so he ought personally to be the happiest, the best, the wisest, and the most illustrious of men" (512).

Across the Atlantic, Emerson joins with the English Romantics in extolling the kind of author called "the poet." He says that the poet "stands among partial men for the complete man, and apprises us not of his wealth, but of the common wealth" (545). "The poet is the sayer, the name, and represents beauty" (546). Just because symbols, tropes, fables, oracles and all poetic forms have the effect of making us feel the power of emancipation and exhilaration, "poets are thus liberating gods" (551).

After the Romantic Movement, poetry seemed to yield gradually to fiction in importance. The succeeding movement, namely, Realism is in actuality more concerned with fiction writers than with poets. In his *The Experimental Novel*, for instance, Zola argues that the novelist is neither a mere copyist of nature, nor a photographer. The novelist is, instead, "equally an observer and an experimentalist" like a natural scientist (649). For Henry James, a novelist may not be such a scientist. Rather, a novelist may well be an utterer of personal impressions of life, since for him a novel is "in its broadest definition a personal, a direct impression of life" (664). And since James emphasizes the stage of execution --"the execution belongs to the author alone; it is what is most personal to him, and we measure him by that" (664)--he seems to suggest that the novelist as an author is a great executor, who is able to finish his work artistically.

In our century, the author is viewed from yet different angles. In the mind of a psychoanalyst like Freud, a creative writer is merely a daydreamer, who fantasies just like a child at play. For Jung, Freud's disciple, however, a creative writer becomes an expresser of "the collective unconscious" or racial memory, as the creative process "consists in the unconscious activation of an archetypal image, and in elaborating and shaping this image into the finished work" (818). And for T. S. Eliot, "the poet has, not a 'personality' to express, but a particular medium, which is only a medium and not a personality, in which impressions and experiences combine in peculiar and unexpected ways" (786). So, the poet is but a receptacle of tradition and a catalyst, whose mind is "the shred of platinum" with which to operate upon the experience of the man himself.
III. The Author Facing Our Contemporary Theories

The second section above has given a general survey of how the author (often more specifically called the poet, the novelist, etc.) suffers continuous changes regarding his social status in the course of Western history. In fact, the author's status suffers even more radical changes in our contemporary age when various literary theories swarm into our cultural market to compete for sales. And this fact heats up the moot question of whether the author is "dead" or not.

Among our contemporary critical schools, the Anglo-American New Criticism can be counted as one of the most influential. With its sole concern with the "text in itself," as we know, this critical school (or movement) has purposely overlooked the importance of the author as the origin of the text. Such "New Critics" as Wimsatt and Beardsley even go so far as to warn us not to commit "the intentional fallacy" by caring about the author's original intention when we read a work. This position has indeed struck a chord with the poststructuralist notion of "the death of the author." However, since New Criticism sees the work as an organic form having in it "unity," "tension," "paradox," "irony," "ambiguity," etc., it implies that the author is a shaper, if not a creator, of that form.

Russian Formalism, it is said, helped to develop the Anglo-American New Criticism. It is like New Criticism in paying close attention to textual details. However, while New Criticism remains fundamentally humanistic, Russian Formalism has reduced literature to a purely scientific object fit only for the study of its method or devices in its linguistic aspect. Hence, no matter what content a work has, it is supposed to owe its value to its form, to the fact that it can "defamiliarize" rather than "automatize" our perception by "laying bare" the formal devices or technique employed in the work. According to this doctrine, then, the author is a technician whose skill it is to bring about the artfulness or literariness of his product.

All Marxist theories agree that men's consciousness or ideology is determined by their social being or material existence. The great Marxist critic Georg Lukacs, therefore, treats the work of art as a special form of reflecting reality, rather than as reality itself. For him, the truly realistic work possesses an "intensive totality" which corresponds to the "extensive totality" of the world itself. Accordingly, the author is overlooked, while the material world (especially
in its socio-economic aspect) is highlighted, in this doctrine. It seems that the
author is nothing but a bearer and presenter of a sort of ideology embodied
somehow in his work.

Indeed, due to its material determinism, Marxist criticism tends to slight the
author's creativity or individuality. This tendency is even more manifest in the
politically-controlled aesthetics of the Communist society. The Soviet socialist
critics, for instance, want their writers to stick to the principles of partinost
(partisanship), narodnost (popularity), and Klassovost (class nature). Conse-
quently, in their view, writers are but supporters of party policies or class
interests.

Literary structuralists or semioticians are of the opinion that literature is a
cultural system, and any system, following its principles of structure or rules of
signification, is composed of a definite number of selected elements or "signs"
divisible into "signifiers" and "signifieds." A structuralist or semiotic critic like
Vladimir Propp or A. J. Greimas, therefore, seeks to disclose the structural or
signifying pattern (with its principles or rules) lying behind a bulk of literature
(e.g., Russian fairy tales or all narrative stories). No matter whether this effort is
worth while or not, it has led to the assumption that literature is "always already
written". any specific work (e.g., a Russian fairy story) is merely the result of
applying some particular set of principles or rules already inherent in the genre or
species of literature to which the work belongs. And this assumption, moreover,
implies that the structural principles or signifying rules, rather than the author,
are the real origin of the work. In consequence, the author is at best a mere
applier of such principles or rules if he is not "dead" yet. In fact, those who
support Roman Jakobson's theory of "metaphor and metonymy" are equally
suggesting that the author as such is a person who selects (paradigmatically) and
combines (syntagmatically) textual elements into texts.

Roland Barthes, the critic who supposedly first proclaimed the death of the
author is considered a structuralist at first and a post-structuralist at last.
However, when he says, "The birth of the reader must be at the cost of the death
of the author," he is a reader-oriented critic, too, besides being a structuralist
negating the originality of the author and a poststructuralist asserting the
multiplicity of reading. Like other reader-oriented theorists (e.g., Wolfgang Iser,
Hans Robert Jauss, Jonathan Culler, etc.), Barthes actually focuses his attention
on the reading process and emphasizes the importance of the reader in
determining the meaning of the text. Therefore, the author is apparently "dead" to him indeed, as far as textual interpretation is concerned. It is only that whereas reader-oriented critics seldom specify the author's status (except, perhaps, suggesting that the author is a provider of texts for reading), Barthes has virtually reduced the author to nothing more than a scripter who draws a writing from "the immense dictionary" of culture. (147)

As a poststructuralist, Julia Kristeva relies much on Lacan's Freudian psychology for her distinction between "the semiotic" (the disorganized, irrational, prelinguistic flux of material) and the "symbolic" (the regulated, rational, post-linguistic order of things). For her, poetic language is liberated from the unconscious. Thus, it is permeated with the semiotic and it has the power to subvert society's closed symbolic order. This theory consequently implies that the poet is a subverter of the social order (a "revolutionary" in that sense) through his poetic language.

Jacques Derrida's deconstructionist ideas (most importantly those of "logocentrism," "differance," and "supplementarity" have denied the real presence of any structural center, and viewed every human discourse as a sign "played" in an endless series of signification. Hence, for an author to write a work is for him to "play" with a "floating signifier" in the game of signification, never able to bring any determinate meaning to the performance. In this sense, the author is then a player in his artistic process, just as a musician is at his instrument.

The American deconstructionist Harold Bloom has evinced the theory that since Milton, poets have suffered an awareness of their "belatedness" and they are compelled to write belatedly, that is, to create an imaginative space by "misreading" their masters. Poets, thus, perform what he calls "poetic misprision" and bring forth revisionary texts. According to this theory, then, the author becomes a revisionist, an intentional worker of "poetic misprision."

In his "What Is an Author?" Michel Foucault tells us that an author's name "permits one to group together a certain number of texts, define them, differentiate them from and contrast them to others" (147). Accordingly, as I have mentioned in the beginning of this essay, the author is for Foucault not an originator of works but a name functioning in social discourses.
In this postmodern era, image-creating communication technologies proliferate all sorts of self-mirroring images so much so that people like Jean Baudrillard envisage the appearance of the culture of "hyperreality" in which the real is lost while the depthless "simulacra" prevail. In this world the best an artist can do seems to be mimic past styles without purpose or irony—an act called "pastiche" by Fredric Jameson. In this view the author, then, is reduced to a practitioner of "pastiche," with his imagination, inspiration, and creativity all "dead."

Our era is also one in which sexual and racial problems become great critical issues. Many feminist theorists have seen vast differences between both sexes in terms of biology, experience, discourse, the unconscious, and socio-economic conditions. As a result, female writing is said to be widely different from male writing. And since our world has been dominated by "patriarchy," literature has become part of the male discourse which often regards women with bias or ignorance culminating in a sort of "phallocracy." If this feminist theory is true, the author—especially the male author—is then a monomaniac obsessed with some partial views of both sexes.

Likewise, many postcolonialist critics have seen a repressive "ethnocentrism" in Western writing. For them, therefore, literature is also biased through the author's ethnic identity. Accordingly, the author is often a racist—another monomaniac, if only he is now obsessed with some partial views of certain races.

IV. Is the Author "Dead" Already?

In one book of mine (The Scene of Textualization), I point out that death is a universally compelling theme, but paradoxically it is not in the primeval time when we had little to guarantee our survival, but in the modern time when mass production promises our plentitude, that we have the keenest sense of, rather, fear of death. Today, this fear of death (or "morpobia," as I choose to call it) has worsened to such an extent that we seem to see death everywhere. After Nietzsche proclaimed the death of God, our modern or postmodern men have proclaimed the death of man, of the author, of imagination, of literature, etc. But as I have pointed out in the beginning of this essay, when we talk of "death," we do not necessarily mean "the ceasing to function of a certain physical body" (as when we say a particular author—Shakespeare or Milton, for instance—died at a
certain time). When we say "death," we are more often than not a rhetorician, using the term as a trope. When Nietzsche proclaimed "God is dead," he was trying to deprive Him of His authority, to deny His power of creation, to disown Him as the sole origin of Truth, and even to negate His omnipresence, rather than to assure us that God's body has ceased to function for Him in Heaven or anywhere. Similarly, when we ask "Is the Author dead already?" we do not mean to ask whether or not any particular author has died physically. We are, instead, interested in knowing whether or not the special group of writers called "the author" has lost its function or status in the human world.

This interesting question has been touched on by Richard Kearney. In his *The Wake of Imagination*, Kearney plausibly divides the whole (Western) world's cultural history into three major periods: the premodern, the modern, and the postmodern times. For him, the premodern world kept the *theocentric* quality of the icon; the modern world offers an *anthropocentric* trend, instead; and the postmodern world replaces both with an *ex-centric* paradigm of parody. As he further explains, the premodern cultures of Jerusalem and Athens tended to construe the artist primarily as a *craftsman* who, at best, models his activity on the "original" activity of a Divine Creator. The modern movements of Renaissance, Romantic and Existentialist humanism, then, substituted the original *inventor* for the mimetic craftsman. But this anthropocentric figure is himself overturned in the postmodern time. All surprisingly, only a *bricoleur* comes to take his place. And this new artist, so called, is a "player" in a game of signs, an "operator" in an electronic media network.

Kearney obviously does not think that the author has ever "died" at any time in history. It is only that the author has *changed* his status or function from time to time—from a craftsman through an inventor to a *bricoleur*, for instance. I agree with Kearney on this point. In fact, in the second and third sections of this essay, I have discussed in even more detail how the author has been changing his status and function in the minds of different thinkers, critics, or writers. My discussion has also implied that the author really never dies; what has befallen him is only an endless series of "transformation." One can never gainsay that every literary work or text needs an author to come into being, no matter whether you call the author a poet, novelist, dramatist, essayist, imitator, artist, craftsman, inventor, liar, creator, genius, semi-barbarian, prophet, daydreamer, catalyst, subverter, monomaniac, or anything else you like. However, when people give the author an epithet other than "the author," they are often talking
rhetorically of his changed status or function in a different social milieu. In that way, the history of the author is one of metamorphoses, rather than one of "being or not being." In that history, one kind of author is replaced by another from time to time as social and cultural conditions change in time. With this understanding, then, I can have this prospect: as computers become our daily necessity, in the foreseeable future the author may be no longer a "writer" who writes on book pages, but may become a "programmer" handling some kind of "software." At that time, we may of course declare that the old kind of author has fallen "dead." Yet, at the same time we must admit that a new kind of author has risen as successor. In that situation, the "race" of artists called "the author" certainly cannot be said to have become extinct. And our conclusion is: better than individuals, the author as a general species surely forever has "generations" to continue its life in this world, so long as men can breathe and eyes can see. As a consequence, "Is the author dead already?" proves to be a rhetorical question. Our answer is: "Of course not."
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