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God is the Ultimate Jokester --Barthes's Dead Author and the Authorless Joke

Zheng Fang

Department of Education, University of Oxford, Oxford, OX1 3QR, England

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ABSTRACT

This study starts from Žižek Slavoj's question about the attribution of the joke text, by borrowing Roland Barthes's theory of "the Death of the Author" in the structuralist discussion, the author's absence and the origin of the "joke" as a literary genre are analyzed. At the same time, the discussion employed the "joke" as a special genre, explained Barthes's way of dethroning the author, as well as the way in which the reader is crowned authority to interpret the text. And through the author, the reader and the function of language, Barthes's theory of author was enlightened, with a new perspective to re-interpret the basic concept of the author in literary criticism.

1. Introduction

At the beginning of the Slovenian philosopher Slavoj Žižek's Joke collection, instead of an introduction, he poses a question rarely asked: 'Who is the author of these jokes?'^①(Žižek 2014, p.3),^[16] which points to the seldom considered truth — that jokes told in daily life never seem to have an author. They are always introduced with the common phrase, 'Did you hear that joke about...?'. Žižek indicates that jokes are 'idiosyncratic' from the perspective of language's creativity^② (p.3). It is commonly acknowledged that jokes are 'collective', anonymous, authorless, and all of a sudden appear out of nowhere. From this logic, this is

why God himself may be the ultimate jokester. However, after Nietzsche announced God's death, the authorless joke, in a way, shows an evident example in the context of postmodernism theory: authorship itself has been deposed.

Roland Barthes's 1967 essay 'The Death of the Author'^③ brought a brand new idea that has become widely accepted by scholarly evaluation of the author: that people who write a text are no longer the centre of it with an absolute authority over their interpretation, as indicated in T.S Eliot's argument in 'Traditional and the Individual Talent': 'No poet, no artist of any art, has his complete meaning alone'^④ (Eliot 1995, p.75).^[12] Nevertheless, despite the shift away from the biographical method

① Slavoj Žižek. *Žižek's Jokes (Did you hear the one about Hegel and negation?)*.

② Žižek. *Žižek's Jokes*. p.3.

③ Roland Barthes. 'Death of the Author', in *Image-Music-Text*, Transl. by Stephen Heath (London: Fontana Press, 1977)

④ Thomas Stearns Eliot. 'Tradition and the Individual Talent', in Seán Burke, ed., *Authorship: From Plato to the Postmodern*. (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1995) p.75

*Corresponding Author:

Zheng Fang, Master of Science in Applied Linguistics, Department of Education, University of Oxford, Oxford, OX1 3QR, England; Email: zheng.fang@regents.ox.ac.uk.

of reading to a greater emphasis on the text itself, the ghostly figure, the dead author still haunts, as Michel

Foucault's seeking of 'the space left empty by the author's disappearance', which has triggered further discussions^① (Foucault 2002, p.12).^[13] Apart from Roland Barthes, Michel Foucault, Jacques Derrida, T.S Eliot and other later critics, despite the heterogeneity of their critical systems, in a way they construct a very essential concept of contemporary philosophy, which is commonly involved with authorship: the notion of the author being both depersonalized and decentralized. The concept of the 'text' is a significant notion in anti-authorial pronouncements, as Roland Barthes in 'From Work to Text' points out that the text is a 'methodological field' and 'a process of demonstration'^② (Barthes 1996, p.170).^[14] Therefore, it is possible to discuss this "authorless" theory through a specific type of text. The Joke, as a special text among other genres of literary works, naturally situates the role of the author in a very delicate position: the author for a joke is an 'anonymous symbolic order'^③ (Žižek p.3).

To analyze the basic idea of Barthes's "dead author" from a simultaneous perspective of lightness and profundity, the paper employs the joke as an example to demonstrate two concepts in anti-authorial discussion: to examine where is Barthes's dead author and crowned reader, as well as uncover how language works in text after losing the origin voice. The following part will firstly discuss the authorless nature of the joke and the process of its spread, and will then be followed by introducing the idea of the meta-joke to discuss its reflectivity and functions of language.

2. The Joke and the Deferred Origins

Žižek, with clear influences of the Lacanian reading, describes the author of the joke as an 'Other of the Other' because jokes are told from one to another^④ (Žižek, p.3). The *Other* (*Autre*) figure, as one of the most complex concepts of Jacques Lacan, defines radical alterity, an otherness which transcends the imagined otherness of the illusory because it cannot be assimilated through identification^⑤ (Lacan 1988, p.19).^[14] In that sense, the author as Lacan's *Other* figure is somehow close to the

basic tenet of modern author literary: the author is an eternal figure of 'Other', which is lacking in the chain of signification. With the joke's lack of origin, the authorial role would never be defined as Barthes's argument that 'the voice loses its origin, the author enters into his own death, writing begins'^⑥ (Barthes, 1977, p.146).^[7] For jokes, with their natural absence of an author, the very unfathomable contingent generative power of language is unable to be personalized or situated into an agent who secretly controls it and pulls the strings; conversely, instead of the author, it is language itself which constitutes the texts. Therefore, the joke could be regarded as a self-evident text of Barthes's author theory. When trying to trace back the origin of a joke, the process is infinite and endless because it always refers back to an *Other*. In the process of spreading jokes, the author figure forever appears as a past with no beginning within language. Thus, the joke as a type of text is one of the potential textual embodiment of Barthes' argument of the text as 'a multi-dimensional space in which a variety of writings, none of them original, blend and crash'^⑦ (Barthes 1988, p.146).^[5] However, when Barthes regards the 'Death of the Author', he does not mention jokes or folktales, but uses Mallarmé as example. Nevertheless, the history and characteristics of the joke shadows the same trail as the 'Death of the Author', as well as Derrida's disapproval of the centrality of speech and 'Différance', which in the context of the Saussurean tradition, indicates the endless deferring of language and the forever processing of the chain of signification^⑧ (Derrida 1973, p.50).^[11]

Furthermore, the joke as a type of text not only evidences the death of the author figure, but also explains Barthes's idea of the reader. During the 19th century, the joke as a part of folktales is seen as authentic in its oral form of being passed down. Jokes are usually spread among ordinary people, and are far from the scholarly world. Alan Dundes defines folklore with concept of 'multiple existence' to indicate the existence of various versions, none of them being authoritative or primary^⑨ (Alan Dundes 1965, p.3).^[11] It seems that during the spread of the joke, the author is never truly comprehended. That is to say, there is no authoritative text for a joke because the addressees themselves become addressors over and over. The roles change of addressees

① Michel Foucault. 'What is an Author', in William Irwin, ed. *The Death and Resurrection of the Author* (Westport, Ct, and London: Greenwood Press, 2002) p.12.

② Roland Barthes. 'From Work to Text' in *Modern Literary Theory*. ed. Philip Rice and Patricia Waugh. (New York: Arnold, 1996) p.170.

③ Žižek. *Žižek's Jokes*. p.3.

④ Žižek. *Žižek's Jokes*. p.3.

⑤ Jacques Lacan. *The Seminar. Book II. The Ego in Freud's Theory and in the Technique of Psychoanalysis*. Trans. Sylvania Tomaselli (New York: Norton, and Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988) p.19.

⑥ Barthes, 'Death', p.146.

⑦ Roland Barthes, *Image Music Text*, edited and translated by Stephen Heath (New York: Hill and Wang 1988), p.146.

⑧ Jacques Derrida. *Speech and Phenomena: and Other Essays on Husserl's Theory of Signs*, translated by David Allison (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1973), p. 50.

⑨ Alan Dundes. *The Study of Folklore* (New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, 1965), p. 2.

and addressors of the joke, in a way, connects with Barthes's idea of the reader. After crowning the reader by removing the author, the situation requires another authority to interpretations. For Barthes, as the absence of origin denies the authority of the author, the destination is better to remain absent too:

A text's unity lies not in its origin but in its destination. Yet this destination cannot any longer be personal: the reader is without history, biography, psychology; he is simply that someone who holds together in a single field all the traces by which the written text is constituted^① (Barthes 1988, p.148).^[5]

During the spread and retelling of the joke, Barthes's 'reader' exists in every interpretation of the text, and their comprehension influences the text in a manner that remains ambiguous. That explains an obscure concept of Barthes's dead author: after deposing the author, the authority does not transfer to the reader completely. The reader remains abstract in the destination while reshaping the story during his or her interpretation. Even though the existence of the multiple versions of a joke reduces the recognizable author, the reader is not the father figure of the joke. They tell it by replicating the story they have heard, and at the same time become a deposed author for the next reader. The joke-teller is not creating, but is instead interpreting or performing, since he is repeating a presented story that has been told in the past. The joke is a multiple-text: influenced by numerous authors during its spread, and transfers through lots of different texts or versions with multiple meanings.

Furthermore, there is a further meaning that the spread of the joke may inspire: the return of the author. In his preface to *Sade, Fourier, Loyola* four years after writing 'The Death of the Author', Barthes indicates an 'amicable return of the author', which is not a 'resurrection of the Author-God' but is the author practiced by the reader, and the author who 'leaves his text and comes into our life'^②(Barthes 1977, p.2).^[3] To interpret Barthes's 'friendly return of the author' from the aspect of the joke, we may examine the existence of numerous versions of the joke. Even though the multiple-text element removes the single author, instead of reducing the actuality of authority, it changes it. A relevant example is Roman Jakobson and Peter Bugatyrev's explanation of the folktale's characteristic: the listeners of those stories have a 'half of censorship' because if the listeners do not restate the story, its destination is vanishing^③ (Bugatyrev

and Jakobson 1982, pp.3-31).^[8] Differing with Barthes' crowning reader whose interpretation composes the text but remains ambiguous during the production of meaning, Jakobson and Bugatyrev's listeners complete the tales in an authentic way: the reader brings life to the stories and protects them from being forgotten, the process of which is the 'friendly return of the author' mentioned later by Barthes. Defining the joke-telling with the idea of 'multiple existence' allows one to perceive the suggestions of Barthes's 'The Death of the Author' in its all its vividness.

By explaining the joke's natural absence of an author and the process of its spread, this part tends to echo the basic idea of Barthes' dead author as well as his unstable, changing reader. Next, to discuss the language in Barthes's 'The Death of the Author' and to shadow its post-modern meaning, a type of text called the 'meta-joke' and its reflectivity will be examined.

3. The Meta Joke and Reflectivity

A priest, a rabbi, and a minister walk into a bar. The bartender looks up and says, "Hey, what is this—some kind of joke?"^④

The meta joke is self-referential; it is a joke about jokes. In the example mentioned above, the readers do not expect that particular observation to come from an imagined character within the text. As a common idiom in everyday parlance, the question 'What is this, some kind of joke?' is an expression of incredulity, with the referent having nothing to do with verbal jokes per se, but with actual lived situations. It makes a plausible appearance as part of the fictive frame: the readers might well imagine a real-life bartender saying something similar, if a real-life priest, rabbi, and minister were to walk together into his bar. But the idiom has a multivalent sense, which is why it works so effectively in the joke. As a comic device the meaning is only denotative, and the bartender refers to the fiction in which he as a character exists. So he is literally — self-consciously — aware of himself and the others as participants in the joke. The notable difference here is the fact that the joke itself comprises the unexpected secondary script upon which the humor hangs.

This kind of reflexivity in jokes is certainly compelling in analytical terms, and suggestive of a larger body of meta-jokes. It is the meta-joke's self-awareness as a communicative form, and its circulation across folk and popular culture that locate it in the realm of the

①Barthes, *Image Music Text*, p.148.

②Roland Barthes. *Sade, Fourier, Loyola*, Translated by Richard Miller (London: Cape, 1977) p.2.

③Roman Jakobson and Peter Bugatyrev. 'Folklore as a Special Form of

Creativity', in *The Prague School: Selected Writings 1929-1946*, edited by Peter Steiner (Austin:University of Texas Press,1982), pp. 3-31

④Salvatore Attardo. 'Limericks' in *Encyclopedia of Humor Studies* (Los Angeles: Sage, 2014) p.23.[2]

folkloresque. It is an intriguing

concept — fictional characters drifting along in the universe of jokes searching for their most appropriate role, and empowered to recast familiar texts along the way. It is an enactment of postmodernism: authorship is removed.

Self-reference is not new to human expressions. For example, *Hamlet* is a play which contains another play in its storyline; *Don Quixote* is Cervantes' novel about Cervantes's novel; Dutch graphic artist M.C Escher draws a hand which is holding a reflective sphere of himself, in which we notice the disappearance of the painter (author) who is supposed to hold the paintbrush, from which we can conclude that the author is killed.

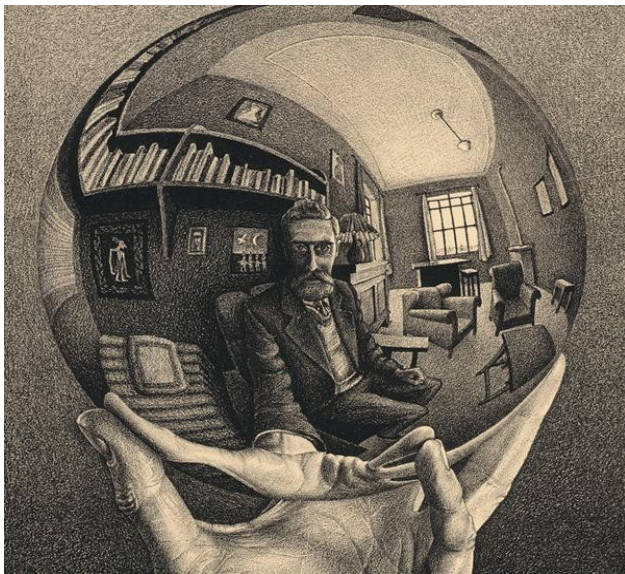


Figure 1: Self-Portrait in Spherical Mirror^①, 1935.

Even Barthes entitles his biography with a direct implication of self-reference:

Roland Barthes by Roland Barthes^②, a self-conscious allusion to the artificiality or literariness of such a work, as well as its heterogeneous realities—after Proust, the biographer must regard the life of the author and his work as two detached objects.

The reflectivity mentioned here is an attempt to find out how language works once the voice loses its origin. Barthes deposes the author and substitutes the epic creation of the text with a complicated procedure of writing. The philosophical drive of the movement is liberalness. The dethroning of the author brings a structuralist worldview that the function of language charges the meaning. Then, Derrida involves the notion of dead author by separating

the definitions of speech and writing (écriture)^③. Derrida indicates that writing is a fundamentally distinctive textuality compared with speech. He explains that the text produced by writing has never relied on the existence of origin, but in contrast, on its nonexistence. If we conventionally regard the origin superior to the copy (the author outside the text is the definable, authoritative one while the author inside a meta-fiction is a fictional, fake, and powerless one), Derrida confronts this situation by regarding representation, copying and repeating as crucial constitutions to the linguistic sign. Derrida indicates that writing is exemplification for significance of its originality; conversely, it is just the writing's *not-being-the-origin* which makes it become the exemplification for sign, demonstration, and signification: 'each signifying behavior is a replacement in term of the ideal form of signified and the signifier'^④ (Derrida 1982, p.316).^[10] In that sense, the characteristics of 'meta', the joke about jokes, is on the same dimension with Derrida's speech and writing: the joke as the first script is the author's speech while the joke-in-the-joke as the second script is the writing and significance of the text in which characters are able to speak for themselves. With the presence of the secondary layer in the author's speech, the writing begins. The reflectivity, or the forms of art with 'meta' as the prefix (meta-fiction, meta-cinema, meta-painting), referring back to Barthes's dead author, are trying to imply that the authority of the author in the first script is somehow fake, and the text itself produces meaning during interacting.

Thus, abolishing the author not only attempts to liberate the single meaning from its limitations, but also attempts to comprehend the nature of the text because the sign has never been itself but a substitution for something else missed, as Derrida points out: 'A text is not a text unless it hides from the first comer, from the first glance, the law of its composition and the rules of its game'^⑤ (Derrida 1981, p.63).^[9] The meta-joke (or any other reflective text) creates an open-ended field, where the focus is not on the meaning of the origin resource, or a particular work itself, but on the process of the text and the way it produces meanings, conceptual ideas, and interactive forms. Postmodern writing becomes the catalyst, rather than authors or creators, and is centered on the idea of performativity. Postmodernism is self-reflexive, analyzing the novel's actual purpose and effect. That is also the

①J.L.Locher. *The Magic of M. C. Escher* (Harry N. Abrams, Inc. 2000) p.12.^[15]

②Roland Barthes, *Roland Barthes by Roland Barthes*, translated by Richard Howard (New York: Hill and Wang, 2010)

③Jacques Derrida. *Margins of Philosophy*, translated by Alan Bass (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982)

④Derrida, *Margins of Philosophy*, p.316

⑤Jacques Derrida, *Dissemination*, translated by Barbara Johnson (London: Athlone Press. 1981), p. 63.

purpose of the death of the author.

4. Conclusion

To conclude, to understand Barthes's way of dethroning the author, as well as the way in which the reader is crowned authority to interpret the text, this paper chose a special text -- the joke -- in which the God-like author is naturally absent. To evaluate the process of the joke's telling and retelling, Barthes's dead author and ambiguous reader are echoed. Also, with introducing the linguistic feature of the meta-joke, the post-modern narrative can be regarded as a shadow and literary expression of the death of the author. Involving with three crucial elements of Barthes's author theory -- the author, the reader, and the function of language -- this paper represents them from a light perspective to reread the basic notion of the author in literary criticism.

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