

# On Borges' View of Authorship

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**Abstract.** Borges' view of authorship contains complex connotations, including his own writing pursuit, his life value, and the significance of literature to human existence and development. Authors in Borges' writing as a whole can be summarized into three categories: creator, servant and discoverer. The different identities of authors as carriers of complex and profound ideas are characterized by his masterful writing skills. Borges' reflection and exploration of authorship reflects the reconstruction of the author's existence, the close relations between author's spiritual dilemma and self-transcendence from literary creation, and the rediscovery of the author in literary production. In summary, his view of authorship is important for enhancing the openness of literature and the author's sense of mission.

**Keywords:** Borges; authorship; identity; literary view.

## 1. Introduction

"The role played by the author as the subject of creation and the aesthetic subject in the work has received increasing attention." [1] Abrams proposed four coordinates of art criticism, the work, the writer, the world, and the reader. From Plato to the Renaissance to Roland Barthes' "Death of the Author" in the 20th century, this path of exploring the creative development of literature by taking the role of the author as the point has gradually gained attention. "The author is not only a static designation, but also a dynamic generative process." [2] However, in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the notion of the "death of the author" under postmodernism did not expose the complexity of authorship from the multidimensional identity, but served as a proof of the subjectivity of the author. Borges is called "a writer of writers". His textual practice presents a unique view of authorship. Although he was situated in the anxious, irrational, and meaningless social and literary context of the 20th century, he insisted on giving values and missions to the author's existence. The multiple writing techniques used by Borges seem to make the author recede, but in fact they complete the author's reappearance. His concept is important for the rediscovery of the author's role in the 20<sup>th</sup> century by the influence of "death of the author".

## 2. The Author is the Creator

In Borges' literary view, the author appears first and foremost as a creator. In ancient Greece, poets had a high status and were called as "authors" or "creators". Plato proposed "The Inspiring Madness Theory" and "The God-Perception Theory" for literary creators. Plato's view of the author as the spokesman for the will of God deprives the poet of his inspirational autonomy. Aristotle, however, argued that the poet could "imitate" what might exist or should exist, which justifies the author's imagination and other literary creation. In other words, the author has a decisive role in the text, and his "insights, virtues and good intentions" shape the reader's perception of the text. "From Descartes, we have stepped into a philosophy of independence, which implies that it is independent from reason, and self-consciousness is the major link to truth." [3] Drawing on the theoretical resources of previous views of authorship, Borges argued that the author is a creator. For example, the title of Borges' poetry collection *The Poet*, which is translated into Spanish as "The Creator" and "The Maker". However, the term "The maker", derived from ancient Greek philosophical connotations, satisfies Borges' lexical need for 'maker (author) and poet' as one, but it does not address his more internal desire and metaphysical thoughts: EI hacedor (creator)." [4] Borges drew on the theoretical cultivation of ancient Greek philosophy, but his reluctance to consider the author's creations as "works of imitation" is also

linked to the influence of Islamic culture. Al-Sufiyyah attributes a religious-philosophical significance to the "divine mandate of poetry" of the ancient times. Unlike Plato's "The Inspiring Madness Theory", al-Sufiyyah recognizes the subjective initiative of the poet. Thus, the author as creator has a profound historical tradition in the development of literature, and Borges put these theoretical inculcations into practice. In Borges's short stories, it often appears that God created the world with language. As *The Writing of God* written, "The word is equal to a language and to everything that language contains; the wild and impoverished words of men, such as whole, world, universe, etc., are shadows or representations of this word." [5] For Borges, the creative activity of language is a creation, not a "production", which has a rich connotation and is able to allude to the appearance of everything in an inclusive way.

Borges drew on ideas from al-Sufiyyah to name his collection of poems and essays, *The Poet*, after El hecedor. "I am a hecedor ....., a poet and an author." [6] Borges' definition of hecedor involves the implicit idea of the poet as creator. Inspired by God, the poet realizes that he has the ability to create literature, which is conveyed in *The Yellow Rose* and other stories. Borges spent his life with books as a veritable professional author and librarian. *Tales from the thousand and one nights* was the first literary masterpiece that Borges read as a child. In this book, one of the main characters, Scheherezade, saved her own life and other women by storytelling. As a storyteller, he was seen as a variation of the poet-as-author identity, and his experience correlated the creation of literature with the continuation of life. Borges once said that the title of *Tales from the thousand and one nights* suggests eternity and never ending, "The Arabs say that no one can read the end of *Tales from the thousand and one nights*. That is not a sign of boredom, but because they think it has no end." [7] In Borges' eternity without end, we can see the author as creator creating a view of time, a view of movement, a mirror maze experience, a view of metafiction, and a view of semiotics. Borges "has actually accomplished a kind of divorce between serious thought and wordplay" and "has more theoretical depth and originality than other postmodernist authors." [8] In *Shakespeare's Memory*, "I" first received Shakespeare's memory, but he later found that he could not really use it for his own creation and felt repressed and afraid. The memory he received were only of Shakespeare's environment, instead of his perception and re-creation of that environment. Shakespeare's memory is unhelpful for him but brings about more confusion and problems, even as Shakespeare's experiences began to erode the memories of "my" unique experiences. This novel illustrates the unique value of different authors' creations and experiences as individuals. Memory is a testament to one's uniqueness, and the experiences and memories of different authors are equal in terms of value. It indicates that creative ability is the variable that produces differences in value, given the equality of creative materials by the outside world.

Author as a creator enhances the author's subjectivity and the author's sense of mission. On the one hand, Borges believed that the identity of the author has its sacredness. Author as a creator embodies Borges' literary ambition and vision. Borges grew up with a constant literary input and output. "He sees writing as an important way to realize the life value, to redeem himself, to characterize his own existence. For him, writing is a sacred cause"[9], and literary creation is his support and faith. Borges put the sacredness of literature into writing and constructed his works with profound meanings and novel techniques. On the other hand, eternity serves as a tool for the interpretation of Borges' view of authorship. "One knows that by reading this book, he forgets his poor life", "I will have misfortunes in my life, but the seventeen volumes are there, the eternity of *Tales from the thousand and one nights* from the East is there"[10]. Imagery such as libraries, books, and words are typical in Borges' works, and eternity, infinity, and the universe are classic themes of his works. Eternity, a sense of mastery, centrality and stable support of belief are the essential factors for people to maintain the existence and even the activity of the spiritual realm, which Borges obtained in his literary creation through the identity of author. The eternal four-dimensional space, the ever-revolving history, the cyclic time, and the dream-like existence are integrated with Borges' profound knowledge, rich imagination, and clear thinking, which constitute the important elements of Borges' eternity in. The defects of author-centrism were exposed after the crisis of reason in the

nineteenth century. In Borges' view, the world is mysterious and unpredictable. Anxiety and absurdity, irrationality and meaninglessness are always accompanied by human beings as the best interpretation of survival. Borges is a writer with strong skepticism. "He questioned the world, doubted humanity, and contemplated fate"[11] and "he is able, at every moment of literary crisis or transformation, to confront the conclusion, proposed such issues as 'the death of the author' and 'the death of the novel'." [12] The position of the author in literary creation, the relationship between the author and the world, the text and the reader, and the creative act of the author are the sustenance of the novels. In his reflections, Borges expressed his search and ideas based on the issues above for the dilemma of spiritual existence of the self and humanity as a whole.

### 3. The Author is the Servant

While postmodernism emphasized the weakening or even the removal of authorship, Borges remained steadfast in his theoretical connotation of the author as a servant. After the nineteenth century, the influence of author-centrism continued to weaken. In the concrete practice of literary creation, Kafka did not believe in the possibility of the author's writing for converging on eternal values, and Surrealism advocated improvisation, thus creating an irony of the author's intentions. On the theoretical level, Nietzsche proposed that "God is dead and man cannot die at the same time." [13] By inheriting Nietzsche, Foucault proposed that "where 'language speaks', man ceases to exist" [14] Roland Barthes clearly asserted the "death of the author", which subverts the author's value. "Writing is the neutral, the hybrid, the oblique muscle that makes our subject disappear in its midst." [15] Borges, on the other hand, attached importance to the independence, openness, and interpretive pluralism of the text. In *Coleridge's flower*, as he once quoted Emerson, "It may be said that all the works in the world are written by one man. The ideas are so united that it cannot be denied that they all come from an omniscient and learned gentleman" [16]. It expresses the conjecture that all the literature through the ages belong to the same masterpiece, and that all authors write to fill it. In this way, Borges expressed the inevitability of the literary creation of later authors to their predecessors, the continuous inheritance and innovation of writing techniques, and the inability to avoid the themes that reflect on the fate of human, thus deconstructing the subjectivity within the authors.

In addition, Borges introduced the reader into the process of literary creation, who emphasized the importance of readers in the improvement or re-creation of the text, and left space and possibility for multiple interpretations in the theme of the novel. "He points out that each re-reading is a re-write, and that every reader of *Don Quixote* becomes, like Menard, its author, for readers are not passive recipients. Once the reading begins, they participate in the creation of the work." [17] Borges emphasized that the author does not have a higher power of interpretation than the reader, and in this respect he bears some resemblance to Roland Barthes. The author is no longer "an individual author in the empirical world, but an impersonal transcendental structure, an inherent mode of experience and a symbol of authority. 'Death' is, in fact, still a metaphor, a challenge to the author's absolute authority, a challenge to the inherent ideology of the rational world." [18] However, Borges questioned and reflected on the significance and value of the author. Unlike Roland Barthes's view that "the author has lost its sacredness," [19] Borges did not deny the role of the author absolutely from a completely theoretical perspective. Nor did he conclude with the complete loss of the author's function, nor did he regard the author as a mere tool in the process of literary creation. The so-called "death of the author" as represented in Borges' novels in general is more of an experiment." The author assumes the role of a server, whose concealment and prominence serve the whole presentation of the works, which is more a matter of literary necessity for him. [20] Borges' book review novels generally present a threefold dimension: the fictional author, the fictional work, and the work's attempt to deconstruct the value of a classic text or idea. For example, in *Pierre Menard, Author of "Quixote"*, Pierre was the fictional author who wrote the fictional work *Quixote*, but in fact the work is a rewriting of *Don Quixote*, and "he was intensely aware that rewriting was a weakening of the original authorship and a harm to the creative personality and originality of the reauthor, which

resulted in 'death of the author'"[21]. The author's intention, feedback and literary criticism in the process of literary production present the relationship between the author and the text, between the writer and the work, and the author changes from the subject endowed with value to the object endowed with value. The act of writing re-examines the role of the author, serving the virtualization of the author and the work, as well as parody, intertextuality, and counter-genre techniques.

As the author of book review novels, Borges used the experiences, overviews of writings and reactions of fictional authors as material for his novels. For example, *Three Sayings about Judas* posits a man named Lüneberg, which offers an alternative interpretation of Judas' experience. The novel portrays the complete experience of an author interacting with his work and his readers, and the novel even mentions the marketing benefits of the fictional book. The main character, Lüneberg, whose works *Christ and Judas* and *The Mysterious Savior* argued for the truth of Judas' betrayal. He believed that Judas' apostasy was a predetermined necessary element or driving force in Jesus' salvation of the world, and that the Son descended to mortal man, then his disciples also had to undergo a corresponding ordeal as a sacrifice. A number of theological scholars attacked his doctrine, so he revised and refined his view, but affirmed and strengthened the assertion that, as the supreme God, the sufferings Jesus underwent to save mankind must also be extreme. The so-called perfect suffering is the deepest suffering: the betrayal of Judas, who destroyed his own spirit and reflected the sublimity of the sacrifice Jesus made with the ultimate sin. Yet his point of view remained unappreciated or unaccepted. "Unbelievers had the stereotype that it was a dull and tedious theological game, while theologians were unconcerned about it." [22] Rather than being skeptical of his views in the face of such feedback, Lüneberg sees it as a sideways proof that he is right and that people would be negative about his theories because God does not want his secrets to be spread in the world. However, Lüneberg also died a sad death because he affirmed the correctness of his assertions and his fear that he would be punished for the secret of God. In this novel, Borges presented Lüneberg as an author whose writing seemed to have no meaningful value, and who identified himself with his writing, except for the fact that no one supported and understood his work, and ironically, he collapsed into ruin because of his own identification with his writing. Other novels by Borges have similar plots, such as *The Mirror and the Mask*, in which the poet and the king finally discovered the oracle of God, but were afraid to know the truth. What the author thinks is the truth, whether it is accepted or not, it is the truth, but it is cursed, then what is the value of the author to explore the truth? Borges cast doubts on the author's identity and status, while expressing a sense of emptiness by setting up the author's creation to be influenced by readers and critics. "Borges sees the purposelessness of life and is aware of the frailty of purpose due to its illusion. Borges no longer pursues it in vain." [23] As a servant in search of the essence of human existence, Borges discovered the word "nothingness" while inquiring about the meaning of human existence and writing for the revelation of history and reality. His works are permeated with the sadness of emptiness in the play of time and infinity, thus acquiring the timelessness of eternity.

In the Borges book review novel, as a servant, the author is able to contribute to the refinement of the novel's form so that the process of the work is produced, influenced, and even reproduced by presenting its entirety. *Three Sayings about Judas* reflects the psychological processes of authors in real life with Lüneberg as example and their expectations of how well the main idea of the work will be conveyed. Moreover, the common phenomenon that the outcome of literature is often the author's intention does not accurately get in touch with the critics, scholars, or ordinary readers. In addition, Borges actually agreed that the author has his subjectivity in literary creation, and his works, including book review novels, generally present a vague and ambiguous state of plot and main idea based on the flexible use of modern postmodern techniques. Unlike Roland Barthes's "death of the author," Borges's so-called "death of the author" does not aim to dissolve the value of the author, and completely discard the role of the author, but rather looks at the role the author should play from the perspective of serving the work, as an experimental tool and instrument. Borges' cult of the book, his support for diversity of textual interpretation, his introduction of literary criticism into novels, fictional authors and works, which seems to be a weakening of authorial subjectivity. In fact, it is a

reflection on the misalignment between the author's intention and the actual effect of the work, and the author's position in the development of literary production. For example, in *Three Sayings about Judas*, besides emphasizing the independence and production of the text, Borges also focused on showing the author's creativity and its influential process, and the absurd contradictions from the interaction of the author, the readers, the work and the world. Another example is *Pierre Menard, Author of "Quixote"*, in which Pierre finally decided to write the Quixote as himself, aiming to replace the authorship of Cervantes against Don Quixote. The novel ends ironically, with Pierre dying before the completion. "Unlike Roland Barthes, Borges mocks the author's intentions by exposing the huge discrepancy between Menard's ambitious writing and its outcome. At the same time, he shows the inevitability of the author's intention by emphasizing "the arts of war are prized above the arts of peace" in Cervantes' works and Menard's Quixote's repetition of "that vague sophistry".[24]

#### 4. The Author is the Discoverer

Borges often considered the author as the object of literary writing. The actual effect presented lies firstly in the role played by the author in the literary work, and secondly in the spiritual pursuit of Borges' ideal author, thus emphasizing the author's identity as a discoverer. Borges regarded the author's creation as an inspiration from God or some absolute eternal ideas, so that they have the ability to discover inspiration and are able to apply themselves to rewrite story material. Poetry is already there, but the author is the one who discovers it. The so-called poetic implication often appears in his novels as symbols such as miracles and oracles that have a sense of taboo. For example, in *The Mirror and the Mask*, the poet, on his third summons from the king, wrote an ode that seemed to encompass all the wonders of the world, but the poet and the king who heard the ode felt they had committed a sin and "learn the sin of beauty, for it is forbidden for people to ask"<sup>[25]</sup>. The author is only one of the subjects who discover the text meaning, and the author's creative intentions are inherently variable. For example, they are sometimes presented directly in the text, or appear in creative talks or memoirs, while the author's creations often include a reinterpretation and reworking of the text, which is a discovery of the implication of others. "Coleridge's creation lies the shared, ancient creation of sentient people through the ages. They claim a flower as a token". Such discovery, in which Borges used his authorship to practice the recreation of the original work that should belong to the readers, is an identification of the reader's role in the process of recreating the text implication, as well as an exploration of another possibility of authorship "When I write something, I have the feeling that something has already existed". The so-called "something that has already existed" refers to the call of inspiration. The process of Borges' creation is also the process of constructing the text implication as a discoverer.

As an author and a discoverer, he has discovered another kind of reality in literature. "Realism is what makes a given work more emotionally rich or expresses more reality."<sup>[26]</sup> Literature doesn't have to connect with reality completely. Literature doubts the reality of reality, while the author creates or discovers another reality in the work. Borges questioned the veracity of history, deconstructed accepted established facts and challenged the boundaries between the real and the virtual. "He believed in ambiguous writing, a way that avoids the reflection of reality while remaining in the ambiguous mystery of uncertainty, because vagueness is also an artistic style."<sup>[27]</sup> The real and the virtual are presented in an ambiguous state in Borges' writing, and he refused to create works with absolute truth or absolute virtualism. *Tren, Urba, the Third Planet* is a landmark work that demonstrates his perception of uncertainty. The novel is of great significance in Borges' literary career, which is a fictionalized account of the planet Thrun and the locale Urba. It is superficially similar to utopian science fiction, but unlike the others, it focuses on the process of gathering evidence that proves the existence of this virtual world, such as presenting details of Tren's religion, history, and geography. The planet is made so real despite of its fiction that its influence has seeped into the reality of the novel, and the fiction is no longer at the forefront. So the writing about the planet has replaced *Tren, Urba, the Third Planet* itself as a more compelling force. Therefore, the boundaries between

literature and reality in this novel are blurred or even tend to be eliminated, reflecting the literature and the real world. And the relationship between the real and the virtual is questionable in Borges' view. The content of the novel reflects Borges' profound thinking about the relationship between the real world and literature, the real and the virtual, the novel and the novel within the novel. The author, as the connection of the above multiple groups of relationships, assumes the role of a discoverer. The material already exists, and the author is more interested in discover and recreation." With a cool tone, what Borges sets on *Tren, Urba, the Third Planet* is not only a mirror of reality, but also a mirror of fictional creation." [28] Borges reflected on his identity as an author with a deeper understanding, and discovered a new value for him, a process in which his identity as an author was reborn and his own existence took on a stage of completeness.

In terms of author, Borges went beyond seeing him as part of the process of literary creation. Furthermore, he also drew self-reflection and existential value from authorship, and incorporated it into his own literary creation. He therefore had a different and subtle sense of the role of the author and accomplished self-discovery in his literary creation. "In his metafiction, Borges becomes more adept at combining self-reflexive techniques with the other skills of postmodernist fiction in order to enhance the story's connotations and authorial intentions." [29] For example, the intertextual technique used in *Immortality* is revealed by the main characters Cataphilus and Borges respectively, thus leading to a duality of intertextuality. Another example is *Death and the Compass*, in which Lenrot, as a party investigating a serial murder case, fell into a trap step by step in finding the killer's next target. At the end of the novel, the murderer, Sarah, confessed that Lenrot was the one who set up the whole to catch the suspect. Sarah traced the key points of Lenrot's investigation backward, thus proving that Lenrot's discovery was in fact arranged by himself. This "backward thinking logic" [30] narrative makes the start of the event difficult to be reached, and precisely because the trajectories of the two men's actions depend on each other, it is difficult to discern which of Lenrot and Sarah is the initiator of the whole event. Therefore, the whole narrative structure and logic of thought is infinitely circular. Borges' metafiction uses a variety of techniques such as intertextuality, parody, and circular structure, and these techniques are used in a position where they are easily seen through and become one of the objects of the work itself, thus exposing the fictional nature of the novel and leading readers to a new understanding of the relationship between truth and fiction. It makes the whole narrative structure and thinking logic infinitely circular, and developing a mirroring reflection, which is "a self-referential narrative of one's own creative process" [31]. In other words, it can also be said that the author is conscious of his own intentions and actions in writing and presents the consciousness to reveal the fictionality of his work to the reader. Self-reflection is the discovery of oneself, and Borges' view of authorship as an author implies the identification and discovery of the value of self-existence. "He sees writing as an important way to realize the life value, to redeem oneself, to represent one's own existence". [32] As a discoverer, Borges refined the author's self-consciousness in his novels and made his metafiction more three-dimensional by means of ambiguous style. He explored and discovered the subtle relationship between the self and the external world in the sacred creation world.

## 5. Conclusion

Borges' view of authorship consists of three intertwined identities: creator, servant, and discoverer. The creator involves the sacredness and eternity of authorship, the servant embodies the exploration and practice of literary creation, and the discoverer carries the introspection and value pursuit of the author as a self-identity. "Borges understands the world from his senses, explores its origin, and constructs a literary world based on sensation." [33] In his literary world which is oriented to experience and perception rather than a rigorous logical system, the author, as a "storyteller," shows the artistic pursuit of returning to the basics from different perspectives. Borges did not regard the author as an authoritative perspective that unifies literature, nor did he fall into the subversion of literary concepts brought about by 20<sup>th</sup>-century deconstructionism, but saw the author's role in the

literary creation as an equal. Whether he is the author as the creator of texts, the servant who builds an elaborate narrative labyrinth, or the discoverer who seeks the path of the "garden path" between the inner consciousness of life and the outer objective appearance, Borges possessed all the ideas, books, and all that has been imprinted on the history of civilization, and constructed a splendid work by means of special artistic techniques. In the multiplicity and indeterminacy of authorship, Borges sought for the connection between the narrator and the reader, leaving his unique mark in the overlapping authorial voices.

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