

Problematizing Authorship, Crossing Borders in Michael Chabon's *The Final Solution* (2004)

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Abstract

*Seen in the context of post-structuralist theories of authorship, especially Roland Barthes' and Michel Foucault', this paper points out a problematic status of traditional understanding of the author as manifested in Michael Chabon's novel *The Final Solution*. Analyzing Chabon's use of narrative techniques, parody and intertextual elements, the author of this paper emphasizes the role of textual production of meaning in which the role of the author's life experience and his status as a possible producer of meaning is understood as rather marginal. As the analysis shows, the meaning is rather generated through an active participation of a reader in its creation. At the same time, seen in the context of postmodern parody, this paper points out one of the possible authorial strategies of reader's participation in the creation of meaning.*

In the traditional understanding of the relationship between author and text, the author was believed to be a singular historical subject and the literary work a direct expression of his/her life experience. Such a relationship evokes the idea of unity between an author and her/his text, and that is also the reason why traditional literary scholarship studied the author's life and experience as potentially a meaningful key to and a source of a text's meaning. This unity and traditional understanding of the relationship between the author and the text as well as the notion of authorship have been undermined by Saussurian linguistic theory¹, Russian Formalism, Structuralism, New Criticism, the Bakhtinian concept of dialogism, Julia Kristeva's theory of intertextuality, Roland Barthes', Jacques Derrida's, Michel Foucault's, post-structuralist, reader-response, reception and other theories. All these theories have significantly contributed to the separation of the real, historical figure of the author and his/her life experience from the literary text as the expression of meaning based on understanding of this life experience. From the literary point of view, this means undermining of the concept of traditional authorship, the originality and uniqueness of the author's status as the creator of a literary work, and problematizing of the concept of authorial intentionality². It also means a shift from the study of the author's life to the study of the role of language and reader as producers of meaning. From this perspective, literary texts are thus seen as producers of meaning within their own linguistic and literary structures (Formalism, New Criticism, Deconstruction), within broader social and cultural contexts, the text being understood as part of these structures (Structuralism), or within a broader transhistorical perspective in which the meaning of a text is studied in various historical periods (New Historicism, Wolfgang Iser). In 1968, Roland Barthes wrote a significant essay entitled *The Death of the Author*. In this essay, Barthes opened a space for understanding the author as an individual physical being whose text acquires meaning not with understanding of the author's life or her/his artistic intentions, but with the interpretation of the text's linguistic structures working in particular linguistic, literary, semiotic and cultural contexts. In all these contexts, the author's role in creation of meaning is reduced, and meanings become correspondingly multiple and created in the chain of intertextual relationships. As Barthes argues, "The text is a tissue of quotations drawn from the innumerable centres of culture" (Barthes online), and it is the reader rather than the author who creates meaning. In Barthes' view,

“...a text is made of multiple writings, drawn from many cultures and entering into mutual relations of dialogue, parody, contestation, but there is one place where this multiplicity is focused, and that place is the reader, not, as was hitherto said, the author[...] 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...the birth of a reader must be at the cost of the Author” (Barthes online).

In this context then, the metaphorical death of the author means the creation of the reader as a function and a producer of meaning, which is finally confirmed by Barthes: “...the birth of the reader must be at the cost of the death of the Author” (Barthes online), by which he means the death of the traditional author and his life understood as the producer of meaning in a literary text.

These ideas were even more radically developed by Michael Foucault’s understanding of authorship and the relationship between the author and the text. Like Barthes, Foucault also separates the author and her/his intentions from the text and understands its meaning as being produced through the interplay of signifiers within its linguistic structures. He understands the author not as a physical being, but as a subject and a product of the text, as a producer of ideas standing separately from the physical experience of the physical being of the author and his life experience. The author’s function thus manifests itself in this separation of the author as physical being from the author as producer of ideas. Authorship is then understood as a function within a particular cultural context — the literary works of a particular author acquire meaning because of the expression of some particular ideas in a particular way which points out the fictional, functional rather than physical authorship, since the text and ideas acquire meaning not through understanding of the author’s life and physical experience, but of her/his ideas attributed to the name of the author in a particular social and cultural context and within a particular literary canon. In Foucault’s view, it is this separation between the physical being of an author and a text which creates what he calls “the author function”, that is the author understood as a metaphor of a producer of ideas through literature in different historical and cultural contexts.

An even more radical separation of the text from the author and the considerable semantic autonomy of the text, although in a different (hypertextual) environment, manifests itself in both hypertextual fiction and in various theories of hypertextual writing as represented for example by M. Heim or George Landow.

In my view, Michal Chabon’s novel *The Final Solution* can be understood in the context of the understanding of authorship as discussed above, and within the framework of various narrative strategies used by this author in order to play with the notion of authorship. Using various narrative devices and tricks, Chabon opens a space for multiple interpretations and for understanding of the relationship between writer and literary text which could be seen as close to the author theories of Barthes and Foucault. In this novel, or rather a novella, the idea of authorship is problematized on the very basic, perhaps extra-literary level. The physical being of Michael Chabon is a contemporary American author, but his book’s setting is entirely European and its time mostly mid-20th century. But Michael Chabon the writer mostly composes experimental fiction and Michael Chabon the physical being lives in the globalized high-tech post-modern American society. We can thus ask the questions: How is his status as a social, historical and physical being related to his status as a writer? How does our understanding of this relationship help us understand the meaning of his novel? In *The Final Solution*, Michael Chabon does not write about his experience as a physical being living in the American cultural environment, and the setting of the book is entirely un-American. The novel is a story reminiscent of the detective story genre as known from British literary

tradition (A. Conan Doyle, A. Christie) which is narrated by a traditional omniscient narrator. The theft of a parrot from a boy and the accompanying murder are investigated and finally resolved by a retired old detective reminiscent of Sherlock Holmes. The murder and theft are finally resolved, the murderer caught and imprisoned, and thus, on the basic semantic level, this novella seems to be only another imitation of the already familiar traditional detective genre as known from the British literary tradition. This novella and genre then do not seem to reflect the author's physical experience, and thus any study or knowledge of his life and historical situation would not be very helpful for understanding the meaning of the novel. Michael Chabon in the function of a writer in the context of a literary canon is known as a rather innovative author. This evokes a contradiction since his novel is seemingly written in the traditional, imitative style of familiar European detective stories, whereas he, in the function of an author, should be understood as innovative, experimental and postmodern. This is also, although only seemingly, confirmed by the title and sub-title of the novel: *The Final Solution: A Story of Detection*. The title implies a detective story genre in which the solution of the murder or mystery creates the central problem. This is explicitly confirmed by the sub-title indicating the generic category of the novel. The expression "final solution", however, alludes to a different context as well, that of Nazism, the Holocaust and racism generally, which is implicitly treated through the character of the mute Jewish boy escaping from Nazi Germany, the boy whose parrot has been stolen. This makes the reader realize another social and historical context and time setting, as well as some other interpretative possibilities extending the meaning of the story, which primarily, on the basic narrative level, implies a simple detective story. At the same time, the story is introduced by a quotation by Mary Jo Salter alluding to the distinction between "detection" and "invention": "The distinction's always fine between detection and invention" (Chabon 2004).

This quotation suggests several meanings. On the one hand, it may refer to the story, with detection suggesting the pragmatic and rational process of investigation of the theft and murder (detection), and invention meant as the incorrect, wrong identification of the false criminal, which really happens in the course of the evolving story. On the other hand, this statement can be read within the allegorical framework indicating the difference between the basic, rational, pragmatic understanding of a text as a simple detective story (detection) and the creative and contextual understanding requiring the use of imagination and knowledge of the historical, social and cultural background (invention). Thus the meaning of "detection" and "invention" does not allude only to two possible readings of the text (basic, primary, as a story of a stolen parrot and murder which is finally resolved), but also to two kinds of authorship. One of them can be understood as traditional authorship, within which the author is understood as a physical being on whose life experience and our knowledge thereof the meaning of the novel depends. Seen in this context, Chabon would thus be understood as the author of a detective story, but at the same time only as a derivative and artistically unconvincing author imitating the great works of his predecessors. On the other hand, the metaphorical meaning of "invention" extends both the basic meaning of the novel and the status of Chabon's authorship. It suggests that any study of Chabon's life, contemporary experience and perhaps even intentions will not provide the reader with any clue to understanding the novel on the basic "detection" level, since he was not alive in the period depicted and even may not necessarily have any significant knowledge of it. What is more important for understanding the meaning of the novel is thus rather Chabon's "function" as a writer, that is his position in the context of the American literary canon including basic aspects of his style, poetics and ideas as expressed in his literary works. In this sense then, his "function" as an author from the Barthesian and Foucauldian perspective is that of a "dead author", taking the role of a particular author with a particular style and poetics writing in a particular social and historical context. This context is contemporary postmodern culture

and, from a literary theory point of view, also the context of a decentralized relationship between author and literary text. This decentralization manifests itself in the depiction and understanding of the characters, settings and period in the novel, since they can be understood only in the context of the notion of “functional” authorship. Chabon’s depiction of characters and period implies a transgression of boundaries not only between various historical periods, but also between seemingly realistic and “invented”, fictional and intertextual characters, between different genres as well as between different kinds of authorships. The story takes place in England in 1944, during the war, and through the depiction of the main characters, this basic narrative time is connected with both the past and the future. The old man reminiscent of the retired Sherlock Holmes who is invited later to investigate the stolen parrot and the murder, meets with a Jewish 9-year-old mute boy with a parrot. These characters represent a metaphorical connection between three narrated periods in relation to which they occupy different positions. Despite the fact that they all live in the narrated “present” and contemporary time, that is of 1944, they occupy different positions within these periods. The old man is described in the following way:

“The old man’s retinae swam with blots and paisley tadpoles of remembered summer light, and the luminous inverted ghosts of a boy with a parrot on his shoulder. He had a sudden understanding of himself, from the boy’s point of view, as a kind of irascible ogre, appearing from the darkness of his thatched cottage like something out of the Brothers Grimm, with a rusted tin of suspect sweets in his clawlike, bony hand” (Chabon 2004: 8).

Despite living in a narrated present, the old retired detective is presented as an archaic, old-fashioned, displaced, almost imaginary and fairy-tale character unfitting to live in the contemporary world not only because of his age, but especially because of the contemporary morality which is unacceptable for him. This morality is metaphorically expressed through various characters who have, because of their age, the best access to power and thus control of society. They are characters such as the Panicker family, Mr. Black, Mr. Kelb, Richard Shane, or detective Bellows. These characters are mostly liars, hypocrites, criminals or arrogant persons. They metaphorically represent not only the generic detective story, but also the contemporary social environment, that is contemporary from the point of view of the narrated present. The old detective’s investigation of the murder of Mr. Shane and theft of the boy’s parrot can be understood not only as a simple investigation of theft and murder as presented in the generic conventions of the detective story, but also as metaphorical restoration of morality and traditional values. It also points out the nature of contemporary society as marked by moral corruption, immorality, intrigues and manipulation of power. The boy, on the other hand, also represents a connection between the past, present, and the future. Despite the fact that he represents the youngest generation traditionally understood as a repository of hope for the future, he is displaced in contemporary society because he is mute. His muteness may be a metaphor of his inability to reconcile himself with the past atrocities of Nazism and the Holocaust, which have had negative consequences for both the past and the future. Although the boy’s family background is not described in detail, his Jewish identity indicates that his muteness could be a symbolic expression of his inability to understand the past, the irrationality of Nazism, to reconcile that with the present and to live a happy life in the future. The title of the novel then, *The Final Solution*, also points out another context, that is Nazism, the Holocaust, their inexplicability, irrationality and their negative impact on the present. The parrot is ironically the boy’s best companion, ironically because he does not represent only the spontaneity of the natural world as the opposite of the absence of human values in the contemporary world and during Nazism, but also because he is a caricature and grotesque embodiment of the absurdity of Nazism. Quoting various

numbers, German songs, the alphabet and parts of fragmented German speech, he reproduces the distorted values promoted by Nazism. This is emphasized by the absurdity of the motif of his becoming the object of theft—that is the alleged codes he is believed to recite and for which he becomes a valuable object. These codes are, however, just random numbers and alphabet letters which one of his previous owners tried to teach him, fragments of his ex-owner's talk, German songs and literature. Since the parrot does not recite any secret codes which would lead to a revelation of a secret or to acquiring a fortune, or bank account numbers as he is believed to quote, he loses his value, he becomes a blank, useless object, rendering ridiculous the obsession of all characters with him and their making him an object of their possible future profit. As the old detective admits referring to the numbers which the parrot quotes, “‘I doubt very much,’ the old man said, ‘if we shall ever learn what significance, if any, those numbers may hold’” (Chabon 2004: 129). This absurdity thus expresses the absurdity of Nazism and crime alike, which neither the old detective nor the young boy can cope with. At the same time, it points out the nature of contemporary society marked by the hunt for material goals that many characters are obsessed with. At this point then, the novel acquires another meaning developed within the framework of the detective story genre. The theft of the parrot and the murder are resolved, but the narrator returns to the narrated present and lets the reader observe the happiness of the boy re-uniting with parrot, but also watching departing trains:

“A train was passing through the station, a freight, a military transport, its cars painted dull gray-green, carrying shells and hams and coffins to stock the busy depots of the European war. The boy looked up as it tottered past, slowing but not coming to a stop. He watched the cars, his eyes flicking from left to right as if reading them go by. ‘Sieben zwei eins vier drei,’ the boy whispered, with the slightest hint of a lisp. ‘Sieben acht vier vier fun’” (Chabon 2004:131).

The departing train seems to remind the boy of the tragedy of his own and Europe's past, the war and the Holocaust, but especially the tragedy of his family. In this context then and with a certain degree of imagination and perhaps exaggeration, the numbers recited by the parrot may be the numbers of prisoners, possibly his family members tattooed in the concentration camps or the numbers of railway cars deporting them to those camps. In this sense then, the detective story generic framework is extended by another meaning, which is that the novel/la can be read as a story about the Holocaust, about a tragic period of European history, and as a story of the commercial, hypocritical and materialistic nature of contemporary, that is post-war society. Chabon thus crosses and extends the boundaries of the traditional detective story genre by modifying the meaning especially of his characters and setting. The traditional detective figure becomes not only an iconic investigator, but also a representative of the old values and morality at present. The victim, the boy, is not only a character suffering from theft, but also a different kind of victim, a victim of the Holocaust and tragic European past. In addition, the characters involved in theft of the parrot are not only various kinds of hypocrites and criminals, but also characters representing the materialistic, commercialized and hypocritical nature of contemporary society. Chabon's construction of the story thus requires understanding of history, socio-historical connections, the literary canon and the position of Chabon as functional, not a physical author in it if we understand it from the Foucauldian point of view. This other meaning is thus based on the allegorical principle in Craig Owens' understanding. This allegorical principle includes allusions, references, motifs and other indicators scattered over the text that create this allegorical framework and other meanings. It is not a traditional allegory as a genre with moral and didactic intentions, but rather allegory constructed fragmentarily through various intertextual allusions, references and motifs. In Craig Owens' view,

“In allegorical structure[...]one text is read through another, however fragmentary, intermittent, or chaotic their relationship may be; the paradigm for the allegorical work is thus the palimpsest[...]Conceived in this way, allegory becomes the model of all commentary, all critique, insofar as these are involved in rewriting a primary text in terms of its figural meaning[...]Allegorical imagery is appropriated imagery; the allegorist does not invent images but confiscates them. He lays claim to the culturally significant, poses as its interpreter[...]He does not restore an original meaning that may have been lost or obscured; allegory is not hermeneutics. Rather, he adds another meaning to the image. If he adds, however, he does so only to replace: the allegorical meaning supplants an antecedent one; it is a supplement”(Owens 1992: 54).

To sum up, then, the position of the author as a physical being and a producer of meaning through the reader’s knowledge of his life experience is thus suppressed and vanishes, since the meaning of the novel is generated not through the study of the author’s life, his intentions or his literary career, but through the study of his role as an author, that is an author in the function of an author (Foucault) who is familiar with contemporary literary theories and canons, in this case an author writing innovative, perhaps experimental or postmodern fiction.

The construction of meaning in this novella is thus based on the author’s strategy of imitating an author of detective stories within the conventions of this genre, but this further leads to the eradication of the function of such an author by generating other meanings based on the understanding of the autonomy and separation of the text from the author as an intentional producer of meaning. Chabon’s imitation of the authorship of a detective novel/la is a playful manipulation of the readers by the author, making them realize the difference not only between the past and present, but also between the past and present forms of representation. This is a function of (post)modern parody in Linda Hutcheon’s view³, and it evokes a metafictional effect in Patricia Waugh’s understanding⁴. In other words, through this strategy readers can distinguish between different forms of representation and between fiction and reality. At the same time, this narrative strategy emphasizes the autonomy of a literary text by making the reader not passively accept, but deduce, look for and ultimately even create its meaning. Through this narrative manipulation Chabon casts the reader in the position of an active creator rather than a passive perceiver of meaning.

Notes:

1 In his *Cours de Linguistique Générale*, Ferdinand de Saussure counters the view of language as a mechanical and natural representation of external reality, but he presents language as an arbitrary system which is based on agreement of meaning among the users of this language.

2 For example, Russian Formalism and New Criticism studied formal aspects of literary texts as producers of meaning; Julia Kristeva, Roland Barthes, Jacques Derrida, Michael Foucault and other, mostly post-structuralist critics, emphasized the textual qualities of a text and literary tradition rather than the author’s experience as the producers of meaning.

3 In Linda Hutcheon’s view, Postmodern parody is both deconstructively critical and constructively creative, paradoxically making us aware of both the limits and the powers of representation-in any medium” (Hutcheon 1988: 98).

4 Patricia Waugh understands metafiction as “fictional writing which self-consciously and systematically draws attention to its status as an artefact in order to pose questions about the relationship between fiction and reality. In providing a critique of their own methods of construction, such writings not only examine the fundamental structures of narrative fiction, they also explore the possible fictionality of the world outside the literary fictional text”(Waugh 1984: 2).

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