In 1968, Roland Barthes published “The Death of the Author”: a theoretical manifest in which he defied the perception of the author as the superior and exclusive authority in all things related to the meaning of the text. Barthes argues that throughout the history of literary scholarship there was a constant search for a correlation between the author’s biography and works. For instance, in his introduction to the sixth edition of Shakespeare’s works (published in 1765), Samuel Johnson (eighteenth century) illustrates that Shakespeare cannot be read separately from ‘Shakespeare the man’ – his biography, background, personality, and extraordinary genius. But Barthes opposes this approach, and argues that the identification of the text with its author undercuts the ability to read and understand the text in a free and pluralistic manner. It encourages us to assume that the author formulated an intention prior to the text, and that there is a meaning embedded in it; a meaning that can be extracted by way of the interpretative process. Barthes argues that the literary text is in fact a performance of writing, a sequence of linguistic acts that do not express a “self”.

It is important to note that Barthes was not the first thinker to question the author’s authority or to view the author as a marginal factor regarding the literary text. Indeed, Russian Formalism, New Criticism and Structuralism were critical movements that challenged the romantic notion of the author as genius-creator, and as one who has exclusive authority over the understanding of their work. For instance, many cite Formalist literary theorist and avant-garde author, Osip Brik, who said that “Had Pushkin never existed, *Eugene Onegin* would have written itself”.

But Barthes’s motivation differs from these schools mostly because it is associated with theoretical trends engendered by the New French Novel (Nouveau Roman). The new French novel – characterized, among other things, by impersonality, anti-sentimental writing, and the de-humanization of its characters – prompted a new theoretical and academic discourse, which itself is often read as a text that theorizes various literary elements. The new French novel defied the features of the nineteenth century classical realist novel, especially the idea that the author is responsible for mediating and establishing a relationship between the text and the reader. It is no wonder then, that under the influence of the new novel, Barthes writes a literary theoretical manifest calling for the detachment of writing from the dictatorship of the author’s personality; a manifest that opposes the way in which we teach, study, and consume literature.

To understand Barth’s text, it is important to understand the social and political climate in which he wrote: we must go back to the events of May 1968 in France – the year of the student protest in Paris. The protest resonated throughout Europe, and employed slogans (expressions) such as “The Death of the Author” to communicate the desire to rebel against French social, governmental, and cultural authorities.

It is in the context of this revolutionary climate that Barthes wrote “The Death of the Author” – a work that marked an intellectual turning point for him. Barthes, who had formulated the manifest of literary structuralism, will, from here on – together with Derrida, Foucault, and Althusser – become a pillar of the post-structuralist school. The student uprising spurred massive protests against the academic establishment and against art, both of which seemed no longer relevant: the academic discourse, and art, were perceived as bourgeois activities that supported the existing order, and avoided any real change of social life.

One of the most popular slogans associated with the uprising appeared on a banner students hung on the gate of the Sorbonne: “Structures do not walk on the streets”. The student campaign against academia was largely against structuralism, particularly, given its innate resistance to political action and authentic social change, to its conceptualization of the subject: the subject was presented as passive rather than active, as a-historical rather than as a product of historical forces, as acted upon rather than active. Interestingly, students identified Barthes with the degenerating academic establishment; even though for him, structuralism was never a-political. In fact, in his book “Mythologies”, Barthes demonstrates how the semiotic deconstruction of contemporary myths reveals the ideologies invested in them.

Barthes himself was ambivalent regarding the events of May 1968; he could not identify with the demeaning attitude students took toward the act of writing and art, and was appalled by their disregard for the written word. Still, it is against this revolutionary context that Barthes (the structuralist thinker) teaches a year-long seminar focused on the slow and close reading of Balzac’s novella *Sarrasine* – clearly a “non-structuralist” gesture. While conducting the seminar, Barthes published “The Death of the Author”. He begins the essay with a reference to the novella – a single sentence citation – then asks:

“Who is speaking in this way? Is it the story’s hero […] Is it the man Balzac, endowed by his personal experience with a philosophy of Woman? Is it the author Balzac, professing certain ‘literary’ ideas of femininity? Is it universal wisdom? Or, romantic philosophy?”

The answer Barthes proposes is that there is no way to determine who is speaking, because writing is the destruction of every source; it is a neutral space in which the author’s subjective identity is lost, “where all identity is lost”. Barthes explains that writing – textual performance – is based on the use of texts, ideas, and signs that pre-exist in cultural circulation. The author’s only license is “to combine the different kinds of writing” because the text is “a space of many dimensions, in which are wedded and contested various kinds of writing, no one of which is original”. Barthes’s conception of the author in fact undermines the existence of the source – he argues that there is no singular, stable source behind the text, but rather that the literary text is founded on inherent intertextuality: it is comprised of endless quotations from multiple cultural sites; it always constitutes a translation of, or variation on, something that already exists. The uniqueness of the text is in its combination of previously articulated and written expressions, and in how it brings existing writings and intertexts together: combines them, sets them one against the other, and creates new links between them. This argument forces us, amongst other things, to broaden our definition of “text”, because every utterance, expression, or cultural performance can be viewed as a “text” that can be repeated, copied, or cited, whether consciously or unconsciously. The death of the author, Barthes argues, marks the birth of the reader. Barthes reverses the traditional hierarchy that sees interpretative reading as a parasitic act, secondary in importance to the literary text. In Barthes’s view, reading is not a consumerist, capitalist, and idle act, but rather an active form of creation, and the *re*writing of the text; reading is always creative, subjective, and unique. Notably, Barthes replaces the structuralist method that strives to subvert objectivity and scientific method, and to locate the generative grammar common to different texts, with subjectivity enveloped in mystery, uniqueness, and in the infinite unpredictable differences between readings and reader-subjects.

In the handout, you will find an excerpt from Borges’s short story “Pierre Menard, Author of the Quixote”. Although written before Barthes’s essay, it produces an interesting thematization for the argument he presents (one can say, in ‘Barthesian’ terms, that Barth is unconsciously citing Borges). Borges tells us about Pierre Menard, an author who is not interested in writing **another** “Don Quixote”, but rather, **the** “Don Quixote”; on the one hand, he does not strive to create something new – he wants to write a text that is identical to the “source” – and on the other hand, he does not want to create a mechanical simulacrum of Cervantes’s “Don Quixote”. The texts – Cervantes’s and Menard’s – Borges informs us, are identical in terms of their language, and still, Menard’s is richer and subtler. In terms of conventional literary criteria, including the ideal of originality, this moment of the writing of “Don Quixote” by Menard is essentially anti-original, perhaps every writer’s ultimate nightmare. But Borges is saying the opposite. He is saying that while Menard’s text is identical to Cervantes’s “Quixote”, it indeed manages to be incomparably brilliant. Like Barthes, Borges outlines a new image of the author; an author whose ideal is not memorialization of the “self” and the writing ego, but rather that of one whose major accomplishment is the re-writing of something that has already been written. Borges demonstrates how repetition is at the heart of writing, and that it is precisely this repetition (and the various contexts in which it occurs) that delivers a surprising dimension of originality.

Barthes’s arguments raise numerous questions. Foucault recognizes in Barthes’s essay the unease that many have pointed to when reading it – the provocative, pioneering conjecture he proposes is often ambiguous and evasive. Foucault identifies in Barthes’s position the possibility of liberating writing from the author’s intention, but he also suggests that there is a mystical, ambiguous, “transcendental anonymity” in the very concept of writing. We are rid of the author, but in the end, we have replaced one authority (the author) with another (the reader). Foucault employs religious terminology in response to Barthes who attempted to formulate the death of the author as an anti-theological endeavor – literature’s refusal of the author-god. He illustrates how Barthes’s polemic transforms writing into a new religious authority, and that in fact, the term “work of art” (creation) or “writing” (*ecriture*) imposes upon the literary text a dimension of unification. Ultimately, one cannot really use the term “creation” or “*ecriture*” without applying the category of the author: to determine whether any text constitutes a work of literature, we will check the name of the author identified with it. When I see a piece of paper with writing on it, with the name of a poet at the top, there is a very good chance that this note will attain the cultural stature of a work of art. Therefore, the name of the author usually defines for us what should be considered a work of art and what should not. To view a variety of texts as a corpus, (in other words, a single, definitive body of works), we will most likely use the author’s name to explain the connection between them. Foucault suggests revisiting discourse on the author, but as a discursive function whose purpose is to organize, define, exclude, categorize, and evaluate different texts within the discourse. Unlike Barthes, who declares the death of the author, Foucault strives to understand *what* the author is (not necessarily, *who* is the author), and how the author functions as a discursive category. As in his studies on sexuality and madness, here too Foucault historicizes what seems natural and

“history-less”: he draws our attention to the idea that attaching the author’s name to a literary work is not trivial and obvious, but rather the result of power struggles and historical changes that impact the organizational patterns of the structures of human knowledge.