The Names of the Other

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Panel: Writing as Philosophy and Craft
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Chance disconcerts us. The idea that the sound and the fury of the world mean nothing is unendurable. We need to create meaning. Writing, playing with the forms of words, creating personalities, and building a text are all ways of pretending that we have some semblance of control. Fiction allows us to believe that all is not chaos, that order exists, and as we write, we show the world the words that we need to hear. We speak of this “reality” as if the proffered phrases came from another. In this manner, every author must coexist with this “other” and must deal with trying to mock, denounce, or pacify him.

The many tricks to which the author submits himself (pseudonyms, heteronyms, inclusion of the author’s name in the narrative and other identity games) are some painful ways of denouncing this split. They are forms of reticence: a reticence that inserts a lack of confidence between the reader and the writer. [A silence is being simulated when what is being done is calling attention to the name: in place of allowing this forgetfulness, these games make us focus more on this name, and this becomes part of the text which should be questioned.]

Hiding behind other names reminds us that we are always strangers in this world and that we should always be suspicious of language.

Anonymity, reticence, and disguises, like erotic games, reveal and hide at the same time; [but they reveal and hide a text, not a body.] They create a relationship between a name and a text. That relationship is necessarily strained: name and text do not conform to one another. Name and text are separated by a fissure; they are in different places, in levels of reality that do not correspond.

If an object is approached too closely, it becomes distorted, it loses clarity; in the same way, if an author wishes to see herself clearly, she must introspect from a distance. She must become someone else. We can think of the pseudonym as a keyhole, the small opening of a lock through which that “other” tries to watch herself: [nakedness hidden behind a veil of modesty. Though something of the author is revealed, something is also hidden.]

A pseudonym that cloaks the name also suggests that the name stands in for something else.

It is the veil, not the nakedness, that produces desire.] The mystery that falls over the name confers upon it a sense of the prohibited because it is so difficult to reach. The pseudonym, conversely, becomes a part of the text, creating new implications for the author's relationship to her work.

Pseudonyms and heteronyms, as well as other tools of renaming, demonstrate the existence of the “other” constructed by fiction, a revealed self that escapes from the text. Not only is a text the
embodiment of a subject, but its subject is recreated as the text is written. The text, in an expression of will, makes its maker.

Perhaps to say that one has “read Homer” is more than a metaphor. That may be what we truly perceive as we read the Iliad – we read the poet’s name as we read the epic poem. Or more precisely, we read the poet’s desire to dissolve his own name, his hope that the reader listens to the muse’s voice, a voice with the power to convince the reader that Achilles’ fury is narrating itself.

It does not matter whether Homer is the name of a bard who entertained kings after meals or a clan of professional poets or the synthesis of an entire culture’s collective work. Regardless of its source, the name behind the voice summons the muse; as readers build in their minds an image of the battlefield, they also build an image of the name that created the battlefield. The name “Homer” weaves a story around itself, a legend that refers to a blind singer from Chios, a prophet capable of silencing his own voice to allow the gods and heroes to speak.

We might wonder about the “ineffable” name of God, as well, a name also hidden behind other names: the name of God, unutterable except in fiction created by those He himself created. Perhaps God himself attempts to separate himself from his own work: a world whose “sounds” compose our language.

“Summoning the muse” might be understood as one’s desire to be somebody else. Similarly, the pseudonym is one intrigue that sustains another. The false name brings literary resources to light. Erotic literature, for example, is frequently written under an assumed name, either to protect the privacy of the actual author, or to give voice to a dark aspect of the author’s personality, a voice different than the author’s own voice. [But there is something more: the false name creates intrigue. According to André Malraux, “intrigue is apt to feign something to somebody; everything that intrigues is an architecture of lies.”; a pseudonym, then, is one intrigue that maintains another. It creates a deceptive architecture, while the trick is left in the open. What is revealed is the intent to camouflage, to hide meaning beneath a mountain of names, as well as the impossibility of arriving at the subject of the enunciation. A false name puts literary resources in the visible realm of fiction. In a symbolic way, pseudonyms refer to the enunciation as a desirable destination that cannot be apprehended but that slides through all speech. The subject is always there, and yet we know it is unattainable. It is offered as object of our desire and makes us different from the other beings in our useless and unceasing effort to reach it.]

The pseudonym is a resonant name that, like another’s eyes or the surface of the water, reflects the original and projects it into the depths, creating an illusion of the infinite.

If a pseudonym is a mirror used to “cast eyes upon oneself,” to view oneself as a foreigner, the heteronym is a way of “casting oneself” as someone else altogether. A new life springs from its creation. The “other” holds what the original desires: another set of eyes, another voice.
Heteronyms offer three-dimensional images. They offer fragments that grow and take on a life of their own. The relationship between a subject and its heteronyms is dialectic and presupposes the fragmentation of reality in order to constitute the literature. These works are voices imposed through a certain style. Voices of the heteronyms are comparable to the effect of a cinematic montage in which images from different cameras are composed in a single sequence. The heteronym uses the idea fragments as a manner of reconstruction and knowledge of the truth.

A pseudonym is a playful deception, another turn of the story's screw. It leads the reader to wonder about the “true” name, as if in finding the true name, something essential would be revealed. It fosters the illusion that a “real” name exists, but that it has been elided or displaced. This idea arises from the very act of prohibition; the reader assumes that if the “true name” does not appear, it must have been displaced and, in turn, something must have been hidden. The owner who allows his words to flow out of someone else’s mouth refuses to acknowledge what his own alias has produced. The author is protecting his own fictionalization. Not one but two mythical beings are constructed: the figure that surrounds the author's own name, and the figure of the pseudonym. The pseudonym is a voice that speaks or a hand that writes. [While the pseudonym can "converse" and "versify," the name of the other is dumb, silenced by an ellipsis.]

A heteronym, however, suggests a coexisting multiplicity of subjects. The fracture occurs in a shared language. Incompatible styles are gathered under a single author, and each demands independence. A heteronym declares its own incompleteness. It emerges from an unrecognizable language and announces its birth: I am an outsider; I speak in an outsider’s voice.

[The pseudonym is granted the written word on loan. It gives voice to another class of representation.]

Unlike all other words, a name has the ability to take control of the person it represents; we do not have a name, the name has us. We are its slaves. The pseudonym, however, relieves the author of that weight. Our names present us, make us "remarkable" because of the name’s power to individualize. Our names are our marks. The opposite is anonymity: to be unknown, to be un-individual. An appropriate pseudonym finds a middle ground, settled between individuality and indifferentiation. A pseudonym has no history, is outside the time, unprescribed, impersonal. The pseudonym nestles between the figures of the “author” and the “narrator” and further loosens the figures’ ties to reality. It intensifies the play between visible and hidden: behind a name lies another; behind a word, only another word.

[Pseudonyms and heteronyms create endless openings in the labyrinth of possibilities, passages that depart from the evident, resignifying what already exists by renaming. These words, suspended mid-air, destroy any vestige of certainty. The obvious is obscured: the subject is made up only of words, and even these words can be a betrayal, leading to layer after layer of meaning and sensibility.]
These name-games contain desire, and drive the request of the enunciation even further away, and in this sense they are erotic: they control and distance the object of desire. These disguises whisper that there is no hurry, that the tortuous road is the most beautiful.

At times, instead of taking refuge in that other name, the "true" name of the author is inserted into the plot as one of the characters.

[In Argentina, Jorge Luis Borges has regularly availed himself of this recourse.]

Even though it seems to be a trick opposed to the pseudonym, it is nothing more than its other face. If I turn it into a person, if I include it in a story, then nobody will be able to believe in the reality of that name. The people are fictional, and later this "me" belongs to the world of fiction. It doesn't have a real existence: from "here," from the place of its enunciation, it has passed beyond the narrative world and into another place. This god doesn't fear being named, in fact, he does it himself. And instead of embodying himself, he prefers to disappear into his own fiction. It is not enough for him to create people in his own image and likeness; he desires to be able to write himself, to mold himself to his liking.

To convert himself into one of his ephemeral creatures is to guard against the unforeseeable. At least there it won't be in the hands of chance.