

MICHEL FOUCAULT "WHAT IS [NOT WAS] AN AUTHOR"

In this essay, the initial title of which indicates that he was writing back to Barthes's *The Death of the Author*, Foucault is concerned with the discourse of authorship. That is, his focus is on the endless statements/discussions which have occurred within the discipline of literary criticism since at least Plato on the author. Historically, the author has been privileged by being viewed as the source of the meaning of a literary work from Longinus, through the Romantics (the poem qua the spontaneous overflow of the powerful feeling of the poet) and into the Twentieth century where, for example, Hermeneuticists such as E.D. Hirsch contend very strongly that the author ought to be the focal point of all acts of interpretation. More recently, in the wake of Benveniste's critique of self-expression, the author has been dethroned from his privileged position resulting in views such as Barthes's that the author is less the cause than the effect of the text. Foucault's thesis is that the author is anything but dead in that it (rather than he or she) is a concept fabricated by the various discourses which emanate from the discipline of literary criticism. Foucault's concern is with the discursive construction of authorship in the ways briefly alluded to above, that is, with the author as a function of discourse (142) and, equally importantly, with the functions which the author has historically served (hence, his frequent references to the author-function in the essay rather than simply the author).

What Foucault offers here is a genealogy of the concept of author which has come to occupy such an important place within the discursive practice of literary criticism. Foucault's point is that, like any discipline, literary criticism has fashioned a knowledge of authorship (a knowledge that is not static but which has changed over time). His goal is to show that this discourse, like any discourse, serves the interests of Power: assigning some texts (as opposed to others) to an author has the effect of making a distinction between certain forms of discourse, privileging some forms and excluding others. (Said develops this point further in *Secular Criticism*.) Foucault's point is that these privileged forms of discourse (especially Literature with a capital L) have enjoyed a special status in European civilisation particularly in terms of their formative impact upon the subjectivity of their readers (Literature has often been thought to be *utile et dulce*) and that Europeans (as well as those they colonised) have internalised profound conceptions of right and wrong conduct and, thus, of human nature from these sources.

Foucault's famous *The Order of Things*, he begins, was concerned with the analysis of verbal clusters as discursive layers which fall outside the familiar categories of a book, a work, or an author (138) and the functional conditions of specific discursive practices (139). He admits that he neglected to explore the discursive construction of the notion of the author even as he naively employed the names of authors (138). Foucault admits that this was an oversight in that the author is a "privileged moment of individualization in the history of ideas, knowledge, and literature, or in the history of philosophy and science (139). In this paper, however, Foucault wants to put to one side for the moment the important questions surrounding a socio-historical analysis of the author as an individual (139): to wit, how the author was individualized (139) in our culture, the status we have given the author (139) in our quest for authenticity and attribution (139), the conditions that fostered the formulation of the critical category of the man and his work (139). These are all important genealogical questions but Foucault desires to deal here instead with the "singular relationship between author and text" (139), to be precise, the "manner in which a text apparently points to this figure which is outside and precedes it" (139).

In recent years, the privileged position accorded to the author has come under attack. Contemporary opposition to the idea of the author is based on a rejection of the idea of writing as tantamount to self-expression. Today, the task of criticism is not to reestablish the ties between an author and his work or to reconstitute an author's thought and experience through his works (140), Foucault writes. Indeed, the predominant sense today is that writing does not derive from the "exalted emotions related to the act of composition or the insertion of the subject into language" (139). The text is viewed today, rather, as an "opening where the writing subject endlessly disappears" (139) precisely because all writing is viewed as interplay of signs, regulated less by the content it signifies than by the very nature of the signifier (139). However, the notion of the so-called death of the author has merely, in Foucault's view, substituted other themes destined to replace the privileged position accorded the author (140). The most important concept which has replaced the notion of the author is the Derridean concept of *écriture*. The quest for an author's meaning has been replaced by the attempt to elaborate the conditions of any text, both the conditions of its spatial dispersion and its temporal deployment (140-1). Has all this not merely transposed, Foucault asks, an author's empirical characteristics (141) into a "transcendental

anonymity" (141)? In granting writing a primordial status (141), Foucault argues, we merely reinscribe in transcendental terms (141) the theological (141) notion of a sacred origin (141). Even the Psychoanalytic notion that there is a repressed meaning to all writing merely reintroduces, Foucault contends, in equally transcendental terms (141) the religious principle of hidden meanings (which require interpretation) and the critical assumption of implicit significations (141). *Écriture*, in short, has not escaped the transcendental tradition of the nineteenth century (141) in that it sustains the privileges of the author through the safeguard of the a priori (141).

Foucault's goal is to reexamine the empty space left by the author's disappearance (141) by observing the new demarcations, and the reapportionment of this void (141). In other words, his objective is to show that the author has historically served and continues to perform several important functions, notwithstanding his/her alleged death. Foucault is particularly interested in the functions performed by the author's name. Firstly, an author's name is more than a mere reference to or a designation of a particular individual in that it is linked less to an individual than to his credited achievements. To say Aristotle or Shakespeare, for example, is less to point towards a specific individual than to gesture towards a whole body of work of a specific kind, an entire discursive construction of the world. Secondly, an author's name serves as a means of classification (142), grouping together a number of texts and differentiating them from others. By attaching a number of texts to a single name, relationships of homogeneity, filiation, reciprocal explanation, authentication (142) are established among them. Thirdly, an author's name also indicates a "particular manner of existence of discourse" (142) because its "status and its manner of reception are regulated by the culture in which it circulates" (142). Any kind of discourse that "possesses an author's name is not to be immediately consumed and forgotten" (142) (by contrast to the "momentary attention [142] paid to ordinary, fleeting words" [142]). Fourthly, the author's name serves less to link a text to the person writing it than to distinguish between texts. It does not move, as is the case with a proper name, from the "interior of a discourse to the real person outside who produced it" (142). It remains, rather,

at the contours of texts, separating one from the other, defining their form and characterising their mode of existence. It points to the existence of certain groups of discourse and refers to the status of this discourse within a society and culture. (142)

In short, the "name of an author is a variable that accompanies only certain texts to the exclusion of others" (142). Thus, the "function of an author is to characterise the existence, circulation, and operation of certain discourses within a society" (142).

Foucault turns his attention next to the four distinguishing characteristics of those forms of discourse attributed to an author. Firstly, all such texts are considered to be the private property of their author. Today, the author functions to designate texts as property whereas a discourse was not originally a thing, a product or a possession of an individual. Discourse became the property of an individual at the moment when the possibilities of its politically transgressive possibilities came to be considered and thus the attribution of texts to specific individuals became a necessity. Secondly, in all such texts, the author is thought to be the source of the text's meaning. The author-function is not "universal or constant" (143): historically, the age of a particular discourse was the guarantor of validity and authenticity rather than its authorship. In fact, traditionally authorship was the guarantee of the validity only of scientific texts but this changed from the seventeenth century onwards. Scientific texts came henceforth to be "positioned within an anonymous and coherent conceptual system of established truths and methods of verification" (143) whereas the meaning and validity of literary texts began to be related to the existence of their authors.

Thirdly, in all such texts, the term author implies a set of psychological characteristics which emphasise originality and genius. The author-function is not formed through the spontaneous attribution of a particular discourse to a specific individual. We construct the rational entity (143) called the author by assigning to particular names attributes of profundity or creative power, . . . intentions, or . . . original inspiration (143) These qualities have less to do with the real individual who wrote the texts than they are psychological "projections . . . of our way of handling texts" (143) by the comparisons we make, the traits we extract as pertinent, the continuities we assign, or the exclusions we practise (143). These operations vary according to the form of discourse and the period in question. Philosophers and poets are not constructed in the same manner and there is a difference between the construction of eighteenth century and modern novelists, even though there are certain transhistorical constants in the rules that govern the construction of an author (143).

Indeed, the traditional methods for defining an author—or, rather, for determining the configuration

of the author from existing texts (143) are derived from the traditional hermeneutical methods practised within the Church for authenticating texts within its possession by ascertaining its author's holiness. Indeed, there were four criteria by which, according to St. Jerome, it could be determined whether certain texts belong to the same author--a standard level of quality, conceptual or theoretical coherence, stylistic uniformity, and the convergence of specific events in a definite historical personage, criteria that continue to be followed by contemporary critical modes.

Fourthly, in all such texts, there is a disjuncture between the subject of enunciation and the subject enunciated. Whereas in speech, personal pronouns may refer directly to the speaker, such shifters perform a more complex function in a text (eg a poem or novel) to which an author is attributed-- they stand for a second self whose similarity to (144) and identity with the author is never fixed (144). What Foucault terms the author-function (144) arises out of the scission (144) between the actual writer and the fictional narrator/persona: it is as false to seek the author in relation to the actual writer as to the fictional author (144). All discourse to which an author is attributed is characterised by a plurality of egos (144), a variety of subjective positions that individuals of any class may come to occupy (144).

Foucault admits that the author may be the author of not just a book, but of a theory, a tradition, a discipline: such writers as Homer, Aristotle and the Church fathers occupy what he terms a "transdiscursive position" (145) in this regard. Foucault's goal in turning his attention in this direction is to underscore that the author-function, sufficiently complex at the level of a book or a series of texts that bear a definite signature, has other determining factors when analysed in terms of larger entities--groups of works or entire disciplines (147). For example, in the nineteenth century, he contends, a particular variation of the author-function emerged: there emerged the "initiators of discursive practices" (145) who "produced not only their own work but the possibility and the rules of formation of other texts" (145), thereby establishing the possibility of an entire body of discourse to which others would contribute in turn but under the aegis of their own name. Freud and Marx are examples of such initiators. It is not a matter of authorial influence based on analogy or resemblance. Marx and Freud made possible not only a number of imitations but also a number of differences, and cleared the way for the introduction of elements other than their own which nevertheless remain within the domain that they initiated. They paved the way in their own work for systems radically opposed to their own initial findings. Subsequent developments built upon their first steps which are sometimes viewed as inadequate when seen from a later vantage-point. The initiator's founding declarations are applied but the irrelevant or inadequate aspects are subsequently neglected in favour of the more pertinent aspects. In the natural sciences, subsequent returns are made to unearth forgotten or obscure achievements in the work of the founding father which subsequent developments in the field of knowledge allow one to rediscover. By contrast, within the human sciences, a return to the initiator is characterised by the desire to uncover a decisive omission that is revealed by a closer examination of the relevant texts: it is implicitly there for anyone to read who does so closely enough. This return to the initiator (for example, Lacan's proclaimed return to Freud) is a discursive mechanism for introducing modifications, a means of transforming the discursive practice as a whole. A reexamination of such fundamental authors as Freud or Marx can transform our understanding of Psychoanalysis or Marxism whereas a reappraisal of Galileo may alter the history but not the science of mechanics. The applicability of Foucault's comments in this respect to questions of literary history, to be precise, the so-called process of writing-back which links authors to their predecessors, ought to be apparent. Indeed, Foucault's comments here make possible the whole notion of discourse/counter-discourse which Post-colonial theorists in particular have found useful.

Foucault suggests, by way of conclusion, that a proper understanding of the author-function could form the basis for a typology of discourse (147). His point is that there are specific properties or relationships linking various discourses that are irreducible to the rules of grammar and logic and to the laws that govern objects (147). The different forms of relationships (or nonrelationships) (147) between a discourse and its author is, he argues, one of these properties which we should consider. Focusing on these relationships between author and discourse would facilitate, Foucault argues, a historical analysis of discourse (147): the time has come to study, he writes, not only the expressive value and formal transformations of discourse, but its mode of existence: the modifications and variations, within any culture, of modes of circulation, valorization, attribution, and appropriation (147) as well as the manner in which discourse is articulated on the basis of social relationships (147). All this would be at the expense of [focusing on the] themes and concepts that an author places in his work (147).

A logical extension of this sort of analysis involves continuing the decentering of the subject (the

author-function being only one of the possible specifications of the subject [148]). He admits that focusing on the structural analysis of a text or ignoring the author as the source of meaning does arouse suspicions concerning the absolute nature and creative role of the subject (148). However, he advocates thinking of the subject, as he did with reference to the author, not as dead but as very much alive, the complex and variable function (148) of various forms of discourse. His goal is not to "restore the theme of an originating subject, but to seize its functions, its interventions in discourse, and its dependencies" (148). There is no question of asking questions such as how does a free subject penetrate the density of things and endow them with meaning; how does it accomplish its design by animating the rules of discourse from within? (148). Rather, we should ask:

under what conditions and through what forms can an entity like the subject appear in the order of discourse; what position does it occupy; what functions does it exhibit; and what rules does it follow in each type of discourse. (148)

The subject is henceforth stripped of its autonomy and creative role and analysed solely as a function of discourse. The old critical questions (Who is the real author? [148] What proofs of authenticity and originality are there? What has he revealed of his self? [148]) are henceforth replaced by new ones: what are the modes of existence of this discourse? (148). Where does it come from; how is it circulated; who controls it? (148).