What Is An Author? By Michel Foucault: Critical Review

Foucault, Michel. “What Is an Author?” In The Foucault Reader: An Introduction to Foucault’s Thought. Edited by Paul Rainbow. New York: Penguin, 1991.

Michel Foucault’s “What is an author?” is distinguished as much by its eclectic form as by its critical content. While all seven sections of this text consider the question put in the title, they relate to each other more contiguously than cumulatively. Instead of building on previous arguments, each part is surprisingly discrete, making this text difficult to summarize a in a sentence or two. Andrew Bennet makes a good effort, however, when he observes the following in his comparative discussion of Foucault’s “What is an author?” (1969) and Roland Barthes’ “The Death of the Author” (1967):

Foucault is concerned with the social and historical construction of the “writing subject…”.

Foucault, however, has other ideas. Instead giving a sociohistorical analysis of the author’s persona, he seeks to explore (a) the relationship between text and author, and (b) how the text points to the “figure” of the author which, at least in appearance, both anticipates and transcends the text (1969, 101).

The implications of these themes first sound in the echoes of Beckett’s rhetorical question: “What does it matter who is speaking,’ someone said, ‘What does it matter who is speaking.’” (Foucault 1969, 101). Clearly, it matters, as Foucault’s quotation shows. Indeed, the significance of this mattering is so great that Foucault takes it largely for granted. Instead of exploring—or even explaining—the mattering of this so-called “immanent rule,” he forges ahead by discussing around two of its themes.

1. Writing as a space for the writing subject’s disappearance (in contrast to writing as a space for expression).
2. Writing’s relationship to death: its capacity to both murder and immortalize its author (1969, 101-103).

Either way, the author is gone, absent from the text but not necessarily dead. Indeed, Foucault picks up where Barthes’ leaves off when he considers what fills the vacuum left by this disappearance. How does this “fill” preserve the author’s privilege? Perhaps more importantly, how does it suppress the real meaning of the author’s effacement, which Foucault understands as bound up with the instrumentalizing writing subject's subjectivity in the service of centripetal discourse.

This conundrum is explored through two “notions,” the first of which relates to the parameters of the author’s work. Foucault’s question: “How can one define a work amid the millions of traces left by someone after his death?” (104) His response: “The work and the unity that it designates are probably as problematic as the status of the author’s individuality.” (1996, 104) The consequence: Foucault calls for a theory of work, but offers little indication what this might

entail.

Writing (ecriture), the second notion, similarly circumscribes the author's presence by way of effacement, in this case by transposing the author into transcendental anonymity. Here Foucault situates this displacement in relation to critical and the religious approaches to writing. Both approaches keep alive a particular image of the author in her absence.

The third section of "What is an Author?" begins with a comparison between Bathes' death of the author and Nietzsche's death of God (Foucault, 1969, 103). In neither instance, argues Foucault, is repeating the affirmation sufficient to give the utterance illocutionary force. The real project here is to "locate the space left by the [figure's] disappearance, following the distribution of gaps and breaches, and watch for the openings that this disappearance uncovers" (Foucault, 1969, 105).

This project begins with considering the functions of the author's name. Like all names, an author's name has a referent distinct from the name itself. This proper name is a compound-complex description with multiple significations. As both the author's name and her proper name, it not only links the proper name and the individual name but also the author's name to her work. With this observation, Foucault draws out the significance of attribution. The author's name has a two-fold classificatory function: it circumscribes a body of text and it conditions reception of this work. Resultantly, "The author's name characterizes a certain mode of being of discourse," effectively differentiating it from other forms, such as everyday speech (Foucault, 1969, 107). To this end, "the name seems always present, making off the edges of the text, revealing or at least characterizing its mode of being" (Foucault, 1969, 107).

The fourth part of this text further develops Foucault's theory that the author's name characterizes a particular kind of discourse. Organized into what he terms "the author function," these characteristics together suggest "…the mode of existence, circulation, and functioning of certain discourses within a society" (1969, 108). Foucault summarizes these characteristics as follows (1969,113):

1. The author function is linked to the juridical and institutional system that encompasses, determines and articulates the universe of discourses. + In other words, authorship is about ownership.
2. The author function does not effect all discourses in the same way at all times and in all types of civilization. + Authorship is especially important to literary texts. Their significance is determined by how they answer the following set of questions: "From where does [the text] come, who wrote it, when, under what circumstances, or beginning with what design?"
3. The author function is not defined by the spontaneous attribution of a discourse to its producer, but rather by a series of specific and complex operations. + Different authors are constructed differently: a poet-author is understood as distinct from a philosopher-author. It is in this section that Foucault talks about St. Jerome's rubric for attribution.
4. The author function does not refer purely and simply to a real individual, since it can give rise simultaneously to several selves, to several subjects—positions that can be occupied by difference classes of individuals. + Said differently, the author cannot be equated with the real writer of the text; the author occupies different voices/positions in relation to the text. Here Foucault interrogates the "I" in writing, observing that the "I" in a preface and the "I" in the introduction may be very different. Foucault understands this difference in

terms of a dispersed rather than split self, a spreading that seems very much in keeping with how I understand selfhood within the context of collaborative practice, and something about which I'll say more below.

The fifth part of "What is an author?" begins with Foucault acknowledging the wider applications for his theory of authorship. Certainly, other forms might benefit from these functions; obviously, authorship involves developing things other than books. Theories can be authored, as can whole discourses, which Foucault understands and 'transdiscursive authorship.' Curiously named "the founders of discursivity," transdiscursive authors produce "the possibilities and the rules for the formation of other texts." (1969,114) Foucault makes this distinction to show the author's function extends to entire discourses, with the work of Marx and Freud being cases in point.

And so, in the final analysis, what makes any of Foucault's observations about the author significant? On the one hand, they have theoretical significance, prompting Foucault to call for a typology of discourse. This typology should consider the relations between discourses as well as their structural and grammatical characteristics. On the other hand, Foucault's observations have historical value, prompting him to call for an (re)assessment of discourse-based not only on expressive value and formal transformation but also on ontological significance. "The modes of circulation, valorization, attribution and appropriation of discourses vary with each culture and are modified within each." (1969,117) In other words, discourses are bound up with social dynamics more generally; as cultural constructs, they are inscribed with the various tensions that push and pull their circulation. Finally, Foucault's observations are important because they call into question "the privileges of the subject" (1969,117), how it functions within discourse. Foucault frames this project via a cascade of questions, which bear quoting here:

Do so means overturning the traditional problem, no longer raising the questions: How can a free subject penetrate the substance of things and give it meaning? How can it activate the rules of language form within and thus give rise to the designs which are properly its own? Instead, these questions will be raised: How, under normal conditions, and in what forms can something like a subject appear in the order of discourse? What place can it occupy in each type of discourse, what functions can it assume, and by obeying what rules? In short, it is a matter of depriving the writing subject (or its substitute) of its role as originator, and of analyzing the subject as a variable and complex function of discourse.

As I address the writing subject elsewhere, let me conclude with Foucault's closing argument that the relevance of his response to the question "What is an author?" resides in his understanding of the author as having ideological resonance. Here Foucault charges the author with a huge responsibility, that of managing the proliferation of meaning in the world. Far from dead, Foucault's author is alive and well, constituted through her own discourse and accountable for her utterances—at least in our current cultural clime. For things may shift in the future. Polysemous texts may resonate within alternative modes, modes constrained not by the author's signature, but by other variables that condition new questions related more to a text's status within discourse.