



## What an Author Is

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one hand, *and* a deconstruction interlaced with an idea of *a-letheia*, on the other.

The good intentions of our symposium to clear these matters up have been confounded. We cannot even tell left from right.

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#### WHAT AN AUTHOR IS\*

**M**ICHAEL FOUCAULT's brilliant and influential essay, "What Is an Author?," argues that the author is not a person at all, but a "function" or "figure" which emerged, in connection with literature, only after the Renaissance.<sup>1</sup> Since it is a historical construct, Foucault argues, the author can also be deconstructed. His essay calls for abolishing this figure altogether and for establishing a new and different way of dealing with literary texts.

At least some of the astounding implausibility of this view is only apparent. Foucault does not argue that one day we discovered (as if we had not known before) that literature is composed by individuals. Rather, he claims that only at a specific time did literary writers come to be treated as *authors*. The distinction is crucial. All texts have writers, but only some have authors: "A private letter may have a signer—it does not have an author; a contract may well have a guarantor—it does not have an author. An anonymous text posted on a wall probably has a writer—but not an author" (148). To treat writers as authors, therefore, is to take a particular attitude toward their texts: it is to ask of them a certain type of question and to expect a certain type of answer.

This attitude, Foucault claims, consists in trying to establish what the author of a text meant by it. We study literary texts in order to determine this (ideally) consistent and profound intention and thus to recapture the state of mind that led to their production. But this, Foucault argues, is an impossible goal which leads us in the wrong direction.

\* To be presented in an APA symposium on Hermeneutics and Deconstruction, December 30, 1986. John D. Caputo will be co-symposiast, and Hugh J. Silverman will comment; see this JOURNAL, this issue, 678–685 and 691/2, respectively, for their contributions.

<sup>1</sup> Michel Foucault, "What Is an Author?," in Josué V. Harari, *Textual Strategies* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell, 1979), pp. 141–160.

According to Foucault, we appeal to the author in order to exclude, in the name of “the correct interpretation,” new uses and extensions of literary texts. We thus cannot see that they mean whatever they can be taken to mean, that they are simply occasions for further writing. The author, in whom meaning resides, is, Foucault claims, used to exclude possible but “implausible,” suggestive but “inaccurate” readings. The author allows critics to think of their work as purely descriptive, aiming to reveal once and for all the underlying meaning of each text and, therefore, rendering further writing unnecessary. The author is in fact a repressive “principle of thrift in the proliferation of meaning” (153). It obscures the fact that criticism is continuous with literature, that, as Foucault believes, it does not describe old meanings but creates new ones. Criticism is literature whose subject is explicitly literature. In attacking the author, Foucault therefore attacks just this descriptive and interpretive conception of criticism as a whole.

We must grant immediately and press more consistently than, as we shall see, Foucault himself does the distinction between author and writer. Writers are actual individuals, firmly located in history, efficient causes of their texts. They often misunderstand their own work and are as confused about it as we frequently are about the sense and significance, indeed the very nature, of our actions. Writers truly exist outside their texts. They have no interpretive authority over them.

An author, by contrast, is whoever can be understood to have produced a particular text as we interpret it. Authors are not individuals but characters manifested or exemplified, though not depicted or described, in texts. They are formal causes. They are postulated to account for a text’s features and are produced through an interaction between critic and text. Their nature guides interpretation, and interpretation determines their nature. This reciprocal relationship can be called, not simply for a lack of a better word, *transcendental*.

To say that a text is authored, therefore, is just to say that it can be given a literary interpretation. Foucault’s comment about letters and contracts suggests that he believes that such texts can be specified in general terms. But, as the letters of Madame de Sevigné show, this is not likely. Not everything, and not every text, that can be understood needs to be interpreted. Though understanding always involves interpretation, this often appeals only to obvious, generally shared background conventions. When this is so, interpretation is so automatic that it constitutes a limiting, null case. This may apply to signs warning of dangerous cliffs, to articles about genetic programming, or even to a fictional account of an Elizabethan sailor washed ashore in Japan. None of this involves special assumptions or idiosyncratic

hypotheses (at least for relatively large communities). The difficulties begin when we try to specify when such hypotheses, and therefore genuine interpretation, become necessary.

Such difficulties are often met by saying that interpretation is needed when a text conceals an implicit meaning distinct from its apparent sense. In literature "a text means beyond itself . . . a railroad is more than a railroad."<sup>2</sup> Interpretation applies to cases of texts whose meaning lies somehow "beneath" or "beyond" their surface. And it is just this distinction, implicated in all the difficulties facing the distinction between appearance and reality (of which it is a special case), that has caused not only Foucault but many other contemporary critics to reject the very idea of interpretation.

We can, however, separate interpretation from the metaphors of depth and concealment and from the distinction between apparent and real meaning with which it has been traditionally associated. A different account, involving the transcendental conception of the author, may suggest that Foucault's attack is not fatal.

Consider interpretation as the process of construing movements as actions and their products. Moving an arm, forgetting a name, a long text: these may (though they need not) be a greeting, an unconscious aggressive gesture, or a novel, respectively. Taking them as such is not to find a deeper meaning underlying their apparent sense. It is only to ask, Why? of them and to expect answers appealing to agents, to intention and rationality. In the case of the greeting, this is often automatic. But in interpretation strictly conceived we account for an object's features by appealing to the features of an unusual, original agent who is manifested in it. We construe it as an event, characteristic of such an agent but not of many, or any, others.

In no such case are there two meanings, one real and one apparent. We simply have a series of progressively more sophisticated hypotheses aiming to construe a movement as an action, a text as a work, and to find its meaning in its relationship to its agent. The results of a rough guess at significance must not be confused with a text's apparent meaning. A square tower that appears round from a distance does not introduce an apparent roundness into the world in addition to its real squareness. Both reifications are illegitimate.

Interpretation must be separated from metaphors of depth; it must be conceived in terms of breadth and expansion. It will then be protected against attacks that, like Foucault's, are motivated by a rejection of the appearance/reality distinction.

On such a conception of interpretation, to take a text as an action is to undertake to relate it to other actions, to account for its features

<sup>2</sup> Susan Horton, *Interpreting Interpreting* (Baltimore, Md.: Johns Hopkins, 1979), p. 7.

by appealing to theirs, and for their features in turn by appealing to its own. We assume that the text's unusual characteristics are as they are because the agent who emerges through them is unusual. We do not show that a stretch of language which seems to mean one thing really means another. Just as there are no appearances in general, there are no surface meanings—except in the harmless sense that just as we can be wrong about what things are we can also be wrong about what texts mean.

Interpretation, therefore, places a text within a perpetually broadening context, not within a continually deepening one. "The most recent history of an action," Nietzsche wrote in *The Will to Power*,<sup>3</sup> "is related to this action; but further back like a prehistory that covers a wider field: the individual action is at the same time a part of a much more extensive, later fact. The briefer and the more extensive processes are not separated" (672). The more extensive process, once determined, may generate a different interpretation of at least some aspects of the original action, which is now seen as its part. This, in turn, may suggest that a new more extensive process must be invoked. This process of continual adjustment has no end. Interpretation ends when interest wanes, not when certainty, or an ultimate meaning, is reached.

Such a view is most strikingly illustrated by Proust in *Remembrance of Things Past*, particularly in the famous scenes of the hawthorns along Swann's way and of the steeples of Vieuxvicq and Martinville. I will present this case in our symposium. For now, I want to connect this view of interpretation with the author-figure.

The author is the agent postulated to account for construing a text as an action, as a work. The author is the ultimate "more extensive process," of which the text is a part—though this is not a process that can be finally captured and displayed. Seeing a text as a work, we necessarily see it as the partial manifestation of a character: the author is that character. We are therefore confronted with this sequence: writers produce texts; some texts are interpreted and are thus construed as works; works generate the figure of the author manifested in them.

There can be no prior knowledge of whether a text can be so interpreted. Both work and author are constructs. Both are situated toward the notional end, not at the actual beginning, of interpretation. In interpreting, we can at most assume that a text constitutes a work, not that we know what work it is. To establish that is just the goal of interpretation; and it is a defeasible goal: we often fail to generate a work out of a particular text. Interpretation, as both

<sup>3</sup> Walter Kaufmann and R. J. Hollingdale, trans. (New York: Vintage, 1968).

Foucault (143/4) and many of its defenders think, is not a two-step process. It does not begin with a clear idea of the work to be interpreted and end by establishing its meaning. Work and meaning are essentially interconnected. To determine what work a text constitutes is the very object of interpretation.

Texts, then, are works if they generate an author, who is therefore also an interpretive construct and not an independent person. But if, as it often seems, texts can be interpreted in various ways, this figure appears arbitrary and collapses into fragments. If the author is our product, why not produce anyone we like out of any text? Why not, as Borges ironically suggests, read the *Imitatio Christi* as the work of James Joyce?

Why not, indeed? But Joyce is the author of *Ulysses*, and we would therefore have to read the work of the late medieval German monk as that of the modern Irish author. This is not a matter of choice: it is just what it is to read the *Imitatio* as Joyce's work. We would connect it with *Ulysses* and we would have to read *both* works differently. We would begin to fit them into a new "more extensive process." This would force a new reading of *Dubliners*, and this in turn would affect our earlier reading. We would also take a new look at Joyce's other writings as well as at Pound's poetry, Beckett's early work, and much else (in short, everything) besides. Whether or not this was actually done, we would remain committed to this extreme revisionism. We cannot demonstrate that this is impossible. But the author-figure would appear arbitrary only if we actually produced such a revision of the canon, along with many others, equally plausible and persuasive. To say that this can "always" be done is far from doing it.

The author, I have argued elsewhere,<sup>4</sup> is a plausible historical variant of the writer, a character the writer could have been, someone who means what the writer could have meant, but never, in any sense, did mean. Writers enter a system with a life of its own; many of its features elude their most unconscious grasp. Many texts might have been radically different had their writers been aware of such features. But the author, produced jointly by writer and text, by work and critic, is not a person; it is a character who is everything the text shows it to be and who in turn determines what the text shows. The author has no depth.

This figure allows us to reject the view that to understand a text is to recreate someone else's state of mind—a view which, I think, is one of Foucault's ultimate targets. Authors have no states that we

<sup>4</sup> "The Postulated Author: Critical Monism as a Regulative Ideal," *Critical Inquiry*, VIII (1981): 131–149.

can capture at all. In interpretation we form a hypothesis about the character manifested in a text, and thus, tentatively, we come to understand that character better. But we neither recreate nor make our own someone else's mental states. We need not assume a character in order to understand it.

In interpreting a text we ask what *any* individual who can have produced it must be like. This is to ask what character is manifested in it, what other actions that character can perform, what relations our text bears to other texts and to the characters they manifest. We do not go beneath the text's surface, looking for a covert meaning. We juxtapose surfaces; we see what texts made ours possible and what texts, in turn, it made possible itself. This is the literal sense of the metaphors of breadth and expansion.

The author, then, is not a repressive principle. We cannot assume that the unity the author represents is there at first, though we may hope to capture it at last. The charge of repressiveness is appropriate to the use of the historical writer as a (supposedly) independent principle by which to judge interpretation. Yet Foucault, though he himself makes this distinction, does not attack the writer. It is the author, he writes, who provides the means "by which one impedes the free circulation, the free manipulation, the free composition, decomposition and recomposition of fiction" (159).

Perhaps Foucault believes that we confuse writer and author and fail to realize the freedom the latter figure offers us. But his attack is against the author, not against that identification. His essay echoes Beckett: "What difference does it make who is speaking?" I have argued that the question regarding the author is not, Who *is* speaking?, but, Who *can be* speaking? Even the free circulation, manipulation, composition, decomposition, and recomposition of fiction is committed to asking that question. No reading can fail to generate an author.

Foucault, I think, himself falls prey to the wrong identification of author with writer against which he so elegantly argues. Though he claims that the author emerges during the Enlightenment, there are strong reasons to believe that this figure's history is longer and more complex. What probably did occur at that time was the identification of the author-figure, which appeared in different forms at different times, with the actual historical agent causally and legally responsible for the text. But this is only a moment in the history of the author. Foucault seems to identify that moment with the more extensive process of which it is only a part.

Because, as I have argued, both work and author emerge through interpretation, neither stands at the text's origin, imparting a defi-

nite, pre-existing significance to it. The author is not an independent constraint, forbidding a priori desired but unlawful extensions of literature and authorizing only accurate interpretations. The author-figure puts the very distinction between interpretation and extension, understanding and use, into question. Foucault, I think, accepts just this distinction when he claims to "utilize" the authors he admires: "The only valid tribute to thought such as Nietzsche's is precisely to use it, to deform it, to make it groan and protest."<sup>5</sup>

Yet, can we use Nietzsche's thought without, at the same time, understanding it? Can we engage with an author, make that author's thought groan and protest, without, at the same time, interpreting it? Isn't that just what I have done with Foucault himself, using some of his own views against him, connecting them with the thought of others, and with my own? Haven't I been interpreting and, at the same time, using him? I can see no clear line between these two. But to argue that criticism must engage only in strict interpretation or, by contrast, that it must abandon interpretation altogether in favor of extension is to believe that just this line can be drawn. This, in turn, presupposes that the author is identical with the writer and therefore also with the writer's own self-understanding. This identification, which also identifies the foes of pure interpretation with its defenders, has been the target of my own attack.

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#### AUTHORS OF WORKS/READINGS OF TEXTS\*

Hermeneutics is old; deconstruction is new. Caputo finds hermeneutics on the right, deconstruction on the left. But then does the new replace the old, the left the right? Often the left cannot hold (things, the steering wheel, governments): it results in bringing back the right. With the return of the right comes the reappearance of the old (order)—which knows how to rule, knows how to open up truth,

<sup>5</sup> "Prison Talk," in Colin Gordon, ed., *Power/Knowledge* (New York: Pantheon, 1980), pp. 93–94.

\* Abstract of a paper to be presented in an APA symposium on Hermeneutics and Deconstruction, December 30, 1986, commenting on papers by John D. Caputo and Alexander Nehamas, this JOURNAL, this issue, 678–685 and 685–691, respectively.