Author and Text: Reading Michel Foucault’s *What is an Author*

P. Prayer Elmo Raj  
Assistant Professor of English,  
Karunya University,  
Coimbatore

Roland Barthes, following the New Critics and T.S. Eliot, with his much debated *The Death of the Author*, renewed the contested relationship between the author and the text. Barthes rejects the Romantic concept of “Author-God” and advocates a structuralist/poststructuralist point of view that it is the “language that speaks” not the author. Barthes writes: “Linguistically, the author is never more than the instance writing, just as/is nothing other than the instance saying/: language knows a ‘subject’, not a ‘person’, and this subject, empty outside of the very enunciation which denies it, suffices to make language ‘hold together’, suffices, this is to say, to exhaust it” (Barthes 145). The author, for Barthes, becomes the “past” of the text and therefore to entail authorship to a text is to inflict limits on the text. The preeminence of language over the author and vice versa is a continued debate. Michel Foucault’s *What is an Author?* is a response to Barthes’ rejection of author as the creator and proprietor of his work in *The Death of the Author*. He centers his essay in the manner in which the text points to the author-“figure”. Instead of entering into a sociohistorical analysis of the author, the direction in which Foucault travels is guided by Beckett’s statement: “what matter who’s speaking” (*WA* 115). With the advent of structuralist and poststructuralist thought, writing has been liberated to accredit writing itself. Moreover, the relationship between writer and death was recreated. Writing, for Foucault, allows us to position the author’s absence embarking upon the “spatial dispersion and its temporal deployment” (*WA* 119) of the conditions of any text. Foucault attempts to determine and enunciate the space that is left void by the author’s departure in the structuralist and poststructuralist theory. If author is not the one who comprises and represents the work, the pertinent question, then for Foucault is, as Anis Bawarshi puts it, “what is that delimits discourse so that it becomes recognized as a work that has certain value and status?” (336). Who plays the responsibility of being the “regulator of the fictive?” According to Foucault, it is the “author-function”.

Foucault sets apart the author-function ascribing four features in relation to various aspects of a discourse that abets and establishes its distinction from other discourses bordering simply to books or text that are authored. Firstly, the author-function is associated with “legal codification”—“objects of appropriation”—the penal appropriation. Historically written speeches and books were ordained actual authors when they were scourged and the discourse was conceded as transgressive. Discourse, in this context, is reposed in “a bipolar field of sacred and profane, lawful and unlawful, religious and blasphemous” (*WA* 124). Moreover, it was at this juncture author’s right (copy right) was introduced and the contraveneous asset that is inherent to the process of writing becomes the influential essentiality of literature. This is a moment of acceptance into the “social order of property which governs our culture…by reviving the older bipolar field of discourse in a systematic practice of transgression…” (*WA* 125).

The author-function, secondly, is neither universal nor constant in all discourses, the kinds of texts that do not necessitate authors; “there was a time when those texts which we now
call “literary” (stories, folk tales, epics, and tragedies) were accepted, circulated, and valorized without any question about the identity of their author” (WA 125). The anonymity of authorship was ignored because their historicity provided authenticity and the author-function is diminished where author stood for the theorem. However, in a “literary” discourse, the meaning and value ascribed to the text predicated upon the “author’s name” for the reason that the genuineness of the text was determined by the “sovereignty of the author.” Thirdly, the author-function is a composite process which involves the “profundity” and creativity of an author to be original. Foucault observes that in modern literary criticism, manifold ways are employed in its ‘desire to “recover” the author.’ Literary anonymity has become unacceptable and inadequate. “The name, as an individual mark, is not sufficient as it relates to a textual tradition (WA 127). Foucault compares the author construction to the manner in which Saint Jerome used to authenticate the work of an author. Saint Jerome employs four decisive factors:

The text that must be eliminated from the list of works attributed to a single author are those inferior to the others (thus, the author is defined as a standard level of quality); those whose ideas conflict with the doctrine expressed in the others (here the author is defined as a certain field of conceptual or theoretical coherence); those written in a different style and containing words and phrases not ordinarily found in the other works (the author is seen as stylistic uniformity); and those referring to events or historical figures subsequent to the death of the author (the author is thus a definite historical figure in which a series of events converge(WA 128).

Though modern criticism does not employ similar skeptical criteria concerning authentication, the author expresses the presence through the evolution of various events in the text and there by positions himself in the text. The author not only signify the “the principle of unity” in the process and evolution of writing but also “neutralize the contradictions” found in the text. Moreover, “the author is a particular source of expression who, in more or less finished forms, is manifested equally well, and with similar validity, in a text, in letters, drafts and so forth”( WA 128).

Fourthly, each text is encrypted with signs accrediting to the author in form of “textual signs” such as “personal pronouns, adverbs of time and place, and the conjugation of verb” (WA 129). These codes have a completely different demeanor on the text with an author without an author. Such “shifters” becomes complex with the incidence of the author and “refer to a real speaker and to an actual deictic situation” (WA 129) when the text is anonymous. When a novel is narrated in the first person, neither the pronoun ‘I’ nor the first person present indicative allude to the author who wrote the novel. Instead, they allude to a “second self” which is complex and variable in characteristic “plurality of egos.” The ‘I’ refers to the alter ego that mediates space and time. Moreover, the self of I conclude or I suppose dose not attribute the author but one who accomplished the task of concluding and supposing. I could be any one who executes similar undertaking if he or she shares the same insight. The self, in the narrator, can also function as voice that speaks the significance and meaning of a work.

Author-function, in its depiction assumes a restrain on the author as Foucault attributes it as a psychic product. The relation of historical author (author-in/as-person) concerning the function of the author is significant in assuming the nature of the author. Foucault does not delve into the matter of relation between the historicity of the author and the author-function. He evades such an argument maintaining that the author-function “does not refer, purely and simply, to an actual individual insofar as it simultaneously gives rise to a variety of egos and to a series of subjective positions that individuals of every class may come to occupy” (WA 130-31). The
historical nature of the author is the key to understanding the construct of the text and the relation between the text and the author. However, the intentionalist argument rests on the irrevocable empirical nature of language that assures that intention will not move away and there is no empirical necessity that the source of author-function, the creator of meaning, the one who establishes the intention needs to be the fundamental author. Thus, the author relates to the basic intent that permits the existence of primary intention that is not bound by the central meaning intended by the author and the future inference that conceives author as a construct prone to change and re-construal. It is, sometimes, not essential to decode or reconfigure the author’s mind at the moment of writing. The reconstitution of meaning of the author at the moment of time denotes the reconstitution of the historicity of the author.

Foucault views that the moment of the author coming into being signify an advantageous moment of “individualization in the history of ideas, knowledge, and literature, or in the history of philosophy and science,” because it is explicitly challenged as writing is autonomous of “expression,” a turnaround that “transforms writing into an interplay of signs, regulated less by the content it signifies than by the very nature of the signifier” (WA 115-6). However, these writings are free of the profound sentiments that are tied to the moment of creation or the incorporation of a subject into language but it is a fixture that moves beyond its own logics. During the pre-Enlightenment period the text is free of author when it was not a creation owned by a particular author. Foucault, unlike Barthes, does not suppose the “death” of the author but argues in line with Barthes as he agrees with the rejection of the subject as the centre of meaning. The author’s name is not a component of speech but it is purposeful that it provides a locus for categorization. The author as a name can be taxonomical in aligning a group of texts so as to distinguish from the other which is the fundamental purpose of the role of an author. The author should not be limited, however, as part of history, a taxonomical device or bounding standard in interpretation and as a pointer to the privileged status of the uniqueness of the texts. The author-function is a construction comprised of different features, psychological, historical and cannot be explained as the unprompted ascription of a text to its creator but a sequence of specific and compound process.

Foucault emphasizes that the subject should not be totally disposed: “It should be reconsidered, not to restore the theme of an originating subject, but to seize its functions, its intervention in discourse and its system of dependencies” (WA 137). The author-function symbolizes a subjectivity that transcends borders to assume an ageless façade of the author which is multifaceted and complex to tangibly elucidate. It corresponds to a hypothetical nature of the author which throws open the domain of creative writing and interaction with meaning assuming a materialized form beyond the particularities of the social consequences. The author-function encompasses meanings that are recognized beyond the borders of the author’s creation making it expressive and taxonomical. It proposes features and estimations that come under the purview of the category of author and thereby unifying by reducing the superfluous elements from the process that creates meaning. The author-function by being expressive and unifying also estimates in advance the knowledge that is already instituted in terms of transporting the authority of the text into relation to the aesthetic authority.

Foucault’s author-function, as a historical construct, is derived in relation to the post-Renaissance literature. He intends to abrogate the author post-Renaissance notion of author and
offers fresh ways of understanding the interconnection between the text and the author. He views that only at particular time in history, the writers of a text was known as the ‘author.’ An author is not the individual behind the text but the cause that establishes and illustrates the text, directs the manner in which meanings are construed out of the text—a transcendental entity. The author-function sets up the definite position benefited by texts in transforming them into works. The author’s name distinguishes a particular manner of actualizing a discourse that is not obscured and elapsed. The status of discourse is normalized within the cultural realm beyond the ordinary and the transitory. Foucault aspires “a typology of discourses based on their specifically discursive properties, those irreducible to the rules of grammar and logic, or to the laws of content, those which instead concern their modalities of existence: the modalities of circulation, valorization, attribution and appropriation” (Benedetti 70-1). The name of the author not only allows us to group a certain forms of work but also contests other grouped groups. Moreover, when the texts are grouped under the name of an author, it establishes an analogous and dependable interconnection with others. The name of the author assumes certain position within an assemblage of discourses, a specific manner of actuality, of movement and process amidst a culture:

The author’s name is not a function of a man’s civil status, nor is it fictional; it is situated in the breach, among the discontinuities, which gives rise to new groups of discourse and their singular mode of existence. Consequently, we can say that in our culture, the name of an author is a variable that accompanies only certain texts to the exclusion of others: a private letter may have signatory, but it does not have an author; a contract can have an underwriter, but not an author; and similarly, an anonymous poster attached to a wall may have a writer, but he cannot be an author. In this sense, the function of an author is to characterize the existence, circulation, and operation of certain discourses within a society (WA 123-4).

The fact that these discourses have an author accommodates the function of the author. Within the orientation of these grouped discourses the name of the author is engraved prior to the procedure of textual interpretation.

Foucault, instead of seeing author as an individual, assumes author as “author-function” or a “figure” calling forth the possibilities to deconstruct and eliminate the author and ascertain fresh and different ways of dealing with the texts. The author-function does not refer to the writer who is known by his or her autonym and “precedes and exist independently of the work” (337). An author is not only the proper name but also a “literary name”—“the rational being” that associates with the work. The author-function at once bequeaths within the work, the concept of an “author” and a certain cultural and status. Moreover, the author-function assumes a privileged status and a functional principle. The author is an agential postulate. “The author is the ultimate, the ‘extra-extensive process,’ of which the text is a part, though this process is not one that can be finally captured and displayed” (Nehamas 688). Within the text is the manifestation of the authorial 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” (Nehamas 688). Thus, essentializing the interconnection of text and meaning, both the author and the work are constructs placed “toward the notional end” and not at the tangible beginning of an interpretation. The hermeneutics or “the correct interpretation” creates the space for “further writing.” The author, in whom meaning resides, Foucault claims, is used to exclude possible but “implausible,” suggestive but “inaccurate” readings.” (Nehamas 686). The author who envisages a descriptive aim to his writing does not
allow any further rendering of meaning by becoming a repressive standard of frugality in the production of meaning” (*WA* 153). Therefore, criticism has to take a step beyond “descriptive and interpretive conception.” Writers are individuals positioned in history. “Writers truly exist outside their texts. They have no authority over them” (Nehamas 686). An author produces at text so that we can 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* (Nehamas 686). Therefore, to say that a text is authored is to open the door way of interpretation which Foucault denies. Not every text needs to be interpreted because comprehension entails interpretation. However, “A text means beyond itself …” (Horton 7) and therefore, interpretation is essential when a “text conceals an implicit meaning distinct from its apparent sense” (Nehamas 687). Moreover, interpretation keeps the perpetual assortment of meaning. As Sean Burke remarks, “On the one hand, Foucault is seeking out the specific conditions under which “something like a subject [can] appear in the order of discourse’, whilst, on the other he is presenting a meta-author figure who finds endlessly circumscribes an entire discursivity” (94). Alexander Nahamas, rejecting the Foucauldian idea that to interpret a text is to recreate and reestablish someone’s mind, argues that the author is a plausible historical variant of the writer, a character the writer could have been, someone who means that 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 show it to be and who in turn determines what the text shows. The author has no depth (Nehamas 689). The author does enshrine within him or her varied states. The author is not a repressive principle that could emanate reflective meaning and therefore, irrespective of what the text is the author and work emerge though interpretation.

**II**

Foucault, as in Nietzsche, envisages author as a splintered self. Foucault’s author is not merely a piece of the fragmented selves but a theoretically generated and a schematically convoluted, functional and consequential of a cognitive individual. It is also a historical concept which does not interfere discourses in a collective and continuous manner but count on a historical moment when the authorship may or may not be attached with the work of art. The dynamics, even within a single work, can be varied and subtle: “discourses endowed with the author-function do possess this plurality of self. The self that speaks in the preface to a treatise on mathematics…is identical neither in its position nor in its functioning to the self that speaks in the course of the demonstration, and that appears in the form of ‘I conclude” or “I suppose” (quoted in Goldblatt 75). Foucault also envisages a self that is in dialogue to explicate the work’s meaning and therefore in the pursuing discourses, the author-function functions as to produce the consequence of diffusion. In this relation, the Foucault makes the author-function a more open category with in the authorial discourse:
“The author-function may tolerate the idea of authors as “founders of discursivity” (such as Marx or Freud) by virtue of which they may be authors of texts that they did not write or, citing St. Jerome’s analysis, an author may not have authored a text that he or she has written (for reasons that have to do with the consistency of a given body of works or the failure to meet certain established standards of quality)” (Goldblatt 75).

Author, in Foucault’s author-function does not refer to any concrete individual but to the name that is referred in relation to the work of art and discourses. Swann writes, “we should develop Foucault’s concept of the author-function “by giving greater historical and cultural specificity and variability both to the notion of author and to the possible functions it may serve” and by examining how writers in particular historical circumstances used the discourses and material practices of their cultures to forge new modes of authorship” (152). The author assumes a collective role that moves beyond the margins of an individual writer through the generative capability that is inherently accessible in the author-function:

The author explains the presence of certain events within a text, as well as their transformations, distortions, and their various modifications (this through an author’s biography or by reference to his particular point of view, in the analysis of his social preferences and his position within a class or by delineating his fundamental objectives). The author also constitutes a principle of unity in writing where any unevenness of production is ascribed to changes caused by evolution, maturation, or outside influence (WA 128).

Foucault differentiates between the sociohistorical investigation of the authorial qualities and author as the taxonomical principle of discourse or text. However, the author-function is limited to specific forms of birth, distribution and operation of discourses within social background. “The author-function stands at some distance from the empirical evidence according to which every text has a redactor; it is the result of ‘specific and complex operations’ that put the unity, the coherence, and the inscription into historical context of a work (or a set of works) into relation with the identity of a constructed subject” (Charitier 29). The texts that transpire out of author-function is unique than the host of other works and the many episodes around the author comprise a biography that features his position as an author. With the proper name attributed to the authorial position pose a structure of tenure that comes to existence in terms of the rights of the author. However, the author-function does not determine discourse universally and in a continuous manner because the features of the texts differ in its sociohistorical existence. The author is not factually attributed to a work of art but has a defined sociocultural function in relation to the text. Author assumes plurality and diversity of roles in author’s association with the text making the function of the author heterogeneously operative at historical and textual levels. However, certain texts are bestowed with the author-function and others are divested of it. “The removal of the historical author from the interpretive process is thus not only epistemologically and psychologically impossible, it is potentially unethical” (Moddelmog 22). The name of the author also serves as a unifying principle whereby the discourse is marshaled and directed for purposes which are specific and distinguish from the others.

Author as someone who generates meaning maintains a sovereignty different from the linguistic principles that administer the creativity of the author. Hirsch maintains that “that
unifying and controlling idea in any type of utterance, any genre, is the idea of purpose” (Hirsch 99). The purpose that binds together is the ‘meaning’ which the author chooses to convey without sustaining the thought, a silent issue. The meaning that is conveyed by the author is not even thought as “pre-typological” by the author itself. Therefore, the meaning conceived by the author can be distributed as the meaning is configured and imagined through the already existing meanings recognizable and on no account particular or absolute. Meaning, therefore, is not deliberate and unchanging because such objects are not totally existing to the mind. The meanings that are recognized by the audience are not foreseen by the author who refers to the mental states than the mental contents that permit meanings that are altered by the borders of reference. The author maps the borders or decides the prospect of the potential meanings by maintaining the ability to construct the creative consciousness.

Authorial intentionalism, according to Hirsch, is a rational approach. Despite the interconnection between meaning and consciousness, there is no consistent relation between the two that could provide any established normative for analysis. Arguing in defense of anti-intentionalists who view meaning as shifting in time, Hirsch maintains that meaning “always implies a relationship, and one constant, unchanging pole of that relationship is what the text means” (Hirsch 8). The meaning of a text alters for the author because the author does not discern what he/she actually meant rather the critique deciphers it better. Hirsch suggests that the reconstitution of authorial meaning to offer clarifications with an established object. Authorial intention does not stay in oblivion but the meanings shared by the author are subjective experiences that are available. The content of the meaning corresponds to the knowledge of the of the author’s “meaning experience.”

Text as communication cannot assume any meaning autonomous of the author. Sometimes, even when the text emanate meaning that is dissimilar to what the author might wanted to reveal. The root of the text is fixed to the author’s intention to reveal certain premeditated meanings through the text. However, a critic can suppose meaning independent of the author that may be “authorized” and guides to the meaning the author attempt to convey. In this interaction between the critic and the author, the author as a reader is not the most convincing. Meaning is an established depiction of a text for one who interprets the text and the author cannot claim that the meaning is indeterminate. Such correspondences are not feasible until the reader or the critic deciphers the foundational meaning of the text that the author attempts to convey. To know what the author conveys through the text, the reader basically should know what the author does not convey so that the reader can appropriate the proper meaning of the text.

Alexander Nehamas ontologically distinguishes between the historical individual, the productive (efficient) cause—writer and the creator of the text, the formal cause—author. The “postulated author,” as Nehamas imagines, is an authoritative negotiator who can elucidate the various dispositions of the text dwelling in the same historicity as the writer but discrete from the writer. “The postulated author is an enabling rather than a repressive figure, and is useful to the extent that it explains the hypothetical nature of interpretations…despite his objectivist manifesto” (Mitchell 43). The author as repressive figure loses its veracity to the text and the meaning in the historical context. When the author is repressive, the author’s process of composing the text becomes limited. The intention of the author to express meanings of his own
primal and uninhibited manner falls under strain. “Such dystopian visions of the author as a dictatorial and repressive figure, the chosen interpretative to see author-based criticism as ‘the epitome and culmination of capitalist ideology’ and...‘the image of literature to be found in ordinary culture [which] is tyrannically centered on the author, his person, his life, his tastes, his passions’” (Mitchell 44). Similar to Hirsch’s idea of inherent sort which is essentially a primal “divinatory guess,” the author assumptions alters in relation to different interpretations. The postulated author unfolds, from the position of the critic or the audience. The author-function, Foucault conceives, is a textual feature and does not have any psychological inclinations but Nehamas intrinsically denies any intention as part of the author. Within this realm, it is almost impossible to differentiate between writer and author. Therefore, it is possible to view author-function as one of the features of any writer, a probable (faulty) description of a historical writer.

William Irwin’s “urauthor” heavily relies on the historicity of the author arguing that in order to recognize the intention of the author one should go to the roots of the formation of the author which is known through the purpose of the text by the author. While arguing for the ontological differentiality of the historicity of the author and the composition of the text, Irwin suggests that the text is not bona fide by the reflection of the author’s thought process. He also assumes a shared dependence: “To recognize an entity as a text is, in part, to recognize it as having an author (a historical producer) and to recognize an author is, as we shall see, to recognize an author construct [and] to give thought to the author is to form an author construct” (Irwin 31). Understanding the author as the hypothetical real is a complexity because the configuration of the text likens the historicity of the author which is interim and inexact. Within the supposed interplay of language of the text and the historicity, the author-construct is the author in disguise. If author-construct is the portrayal of the author in his/her historical milieu, then the Irwin’s urauthor loses its significance by becoming expressive and losing its normativity.

Barthes advocates the exclusion of the author on the whole against the notion that the author precedes the creation. He views author and the text working concurrently where the cultural inclinations of the author is a pre-existent kind and transpires as the text comes to existence. Therefore, it is the reader who generates the meaning and occupies an important place in the literary context. However, in Foucault’s notion, the reader with its pre-eminent subjectivity is no longer the foundation for the generation of meaning. Citron views author-function as “a kind of take-over plant, like kudzu, that spreads rapidly into other forms and then emerges on the surface as the only viable” (119). The author seen as positioned in particular time, place and subjectivity would modulate the process and context of the making of the text by deconstructing Universalist systemic tendencies and offering flexible forms.

Modern literary theory refutes the part played by the author-function “beyond the narrative, interpretive, or in general semantic problems of the text, and at the same time, “benefitting from it” tacitly insofar as the author-function is implied in the very constitution of literary theory’s object of inquiry” (Benedetti 74). Theory continues to maintain a despotic attitude toward author-function at the cost of the link between the work of art and value. Foucault’s author-function, as a culturally encompassing category brings together discourses from varied disciplines. However, from the literary point of view, the author is inevitably connected to the procedure of aesthetic validation. The connection between the author and
artistic value is secure and palpable at the same time and makes it a contingent interconnection between the possible provenance of value and intention. Myler observes, “As a discursive construct the concept of author is utilized in order to instate and perpetuate certain “truths” about the nature of not only literature and how we read, but the industry, legalities and institutions involved in the distribution, regulation and promotion of literature and knowledge” (86-7). Foucault’s author function can conjure up a corpus of work that enkindles the idea of an author. The historically and culturally inclined author-function of Foucault is bound to change as an evolving authorial body. The author-function in a technocratic age finds no significance as the definition of authorship and the purpose of authorship increasingly becomes complex through the digital and e-resources. In the same manner, the name of the author and the function of the name as Foucault imagines might not be significant as the creators do not matter but only the content (Cwiok 111). The author is distanced from the subject function but accures on the manner where the personal name becomes a collective rational force behind the outcome of the text. The void between the notions of the historicity of the author and the nebulous idea of the writing subject corresponds to the creative break from modernity.

Works Cited:


