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FOUCAULT ON THE 'QUESTION OF THE AUTHOR': A CRITICAL EXEGESIS

It might be said that the author-figure, whose death was announced in the late 1960s, came back to life in the 1990s, when there emerged a renewed debate in literary theory over the problem of authorship;[1] and this prompted a reappraisal of those now classic essays in which Roland Barthes and Michel Foucault originally proclaimed—or seemed to proclaim—the author's demise.[2] The present paper continues this reassessment by examining Foucault's chief contribution to the author-figure's funerary rites: his lecture of February 1969 entitled 'Qu'est-ce qu'un auteur?'.[3] That lecture, translated into English in 1977 as 'What is an Author?', entered the canon of discussions of authorship and has been selectively reprinted in English at least three times.[4] Yet throughout the 1980s it never received the close critical attention which it deserved, and which its classic status should surely have entailed. Instead, commentators on all sides variously endorsed and criticized what were taken to be Foucault's claims, without actually scrutinizing his argument. This curious conceptual silence was broken in 1992, with the publication of Seàn Burke's elegant and wide-ranging *The Death and Return of the Author*—a compelling reappraisal of the anti-authorial works of Barthes, Foucault, and Derrida. By focusing on the rhetoric of these theoretical writings, Burke has revealed a remarkable range of both strengths and troubles in their arguments. Not the least of Burke's achievements has been to rephrase the question of Foucault's 'What is an Author?' itself, asking instead: 'What (and who) is an author?'[5] As we shall see in due course, this reformulation proves to be apt indeed; and I hope to show that a strategy akin to Burke's yields still further fruits when applied anew to 'What is an Author?'

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[1] The same applies to the accompanying figure of the literary work: see Margit Sutrop, 'The Death of the Literary Work', *Philosophy and Literature*, 18 (1994), 38–49.

[2] Peter Lamarque, 'The Death of the Author: An Analytical Autopsy', *British Journal of Aesthetics*, 30 (1990), 319–31; Seàn Burke, *The Death and Return of the Author: Criticism and Subjectivity in Barthes, Foucault and Derrida* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1992; repr. 1998); Sutrop, 'The Death of the Literary Work'; Donald Keefer, 'Reports of the Death of the Author', *Philosophy and Literature*, 19 (1995), 78–84. See also the essays in *What is an Author?*, ed. by Maurice Biriotti and Nicola Miller (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1993), and the papers reprinted in *Authorship: From Plato to the Postmodern*, ed. by Seàn Burke (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1995).

[3] Page references in the text below are to Michel Foucault, 'What is an Author?', trans. by Donald F. Bouchard and Sherry Simon, in *Language, Counter-Memory, Practice*, ed. by Donald F. Bouchard (Oxford: Blackwell, 1977), pp. 113–38. For the relationship between this text and the original 1969 lecture see the editor's note, p. 113, and Burke, *Death and Return*, pp. 89–94. There were two French versions: see *Dits et écrits 1954–1988 par Michel Foucault*, ed. by Daniel Defert and François Ewald, 4 vols (Paris: Gallimard, 1994), I, 789–812.

[4] *Textual Strategies: Perspectives in Post-Structuralist Criticism*, ed. by Josué V. Harari (London: Methuen, 1980), pp. 141–60; *Theories of Authorship*, ed. by John Caughie (London: Routledge, 1981; repr. 1986, 1988), pp. 282–91; *Authorship*, ed. by Burke, pp. 233–46.

[5] Burke, *Death and Return*, pp. 78–89 (title of the section).

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1. *Foucault's 'What is an Author?' and its Contexts*

The chief context of Foucault's 'Qu'est-ce qu'un auteur?' was Barthes's essay 'La mort de l'auteur', written in 1967 and published in 1968—a typically pithy piece which announced, in the words of its title, 'the death of the author'. Here, after quoting a sentence from Balzac's *Sarrasine*, Barthes began by asking:

> Who is speaking thus? Is it the hero of the story . . .? Is it the individual Balzac . . .? Is it Balzac the author . . .? Is it universal wisdom? Romantic psychology? We shall never know, for the good reason that writing [*écriture*] is the destruction of every voice, of every origin. Writing is that neutral, that composite, that oblique space where our subject slips away, the [photographic] negative where every identity is lost, starting with the identity of the very body which writes.[6]

As this striking introduction made clear, the point of Barthes's argument was to replace the figure of the author (or rather, 'the Author', capitalized) with the figure of *écriture*.[7] To evoke the possibility and the necessity of this transformation, Barthes developed a little history of writing and authorship, a history which fell into three phases: primordial grace, subsequent fall, future redemption. In the original state of grace—preserved to this day in 'ethnographic societies'—writing had known itself for what it was; subsequently, writing was corrupted by the gradual birth of modern society, which installed the tyrannical figure of the Author; finally, there was now supervening a moment of redemptive return, i.e. the 'destruction of the author' or 'death of the author', which would at long last restore writing to itself.

But how could writing redeem itself from its authorial deformation? In the course of the modern age, Barthes explained, certain writers—first and foremost Mallarmé, then after him Valéry, Proust, and the Surrealists—had struggled to bring about this very emancipation; yet their valiant efforts had proved to be no more than a series of heroic failures. These attempts, then, amounted in the end to an unwitting collective testimony to 'the sway of the Author'. Yet help was now at hand from linguistics, which was making it possible, for the first time, to strip away the illusions of authorship. For linguistics had recently revealed the truth of language itself, namely:

> that the whole of the enunciation is an empty process, functioning perfectly without there being any need for it to be filled with the person of the interlocutors. Linguistically, the author is never more than the instance writing, just as *I* is nothing other than the instance saying *I*: language knows a 'subject', not a 'person', and this subject, empty outside of the very enunciation which defines it, suffices to make language 'hold together', suffices, that is to say, to exhaust it.[8]

To assimilate the lesson supplied by linguistics was to dethrone the Author. No longer would writing emanate, or be taken to emanate, from some parental

[6] Roland Barthes, 'La mort de l'auteur' (1968), repr. in his *Le Bruissement de la langue* (Paris: Seuil, 1984), pp. 61–67 (p. 61); English translation adapted from that of Stephen Heath, 'The Death of the Author', in Barthes, *Image Music Text*, essays selected and translated by Stephen Heath (London: Fontana/Collins, 1977), pp. 142–48 (p. 142).

[7] Hence the radical distinction between *écriture* (writing as detached from 'all agency, all activity') and *écrire* (writing as the action of an agent): see Anne Banfield, 'Écriture, Narration and the Grammar of French', in *Narrative from Malory to Motion Pictures*, ed. by Jeremy Hawthorn (London: Arnold, 1985), pp. 1–22 (p. 13).

[8] Barthes, 'La mort de l'auteur', pp. 63–64.

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figure anterior to itself, i.e. from the Author or from the Author's 'hypostases'—society, history, *psychē*, liberty; instead, writing could now at last be repositioned back where it belonged, that is to say, inside language. This apocalyptic redemption of writing would entail killing not only the Author but also the Critic; the collusive pair Author–Critic would now be replaced by the new couplet of 'the modern scriptor' and the sovereign reader. The 'modern scriptor' would be a writer who is not an Author, whose being does not precede writing but on the contrary is constituted and delimited by writing itself.[9] Correspondingly, although Barthes did not foreground this point, the Author's product was a 'book', whereas the 'modern scriptor' was associated not with a book but with a 'text'. But the fundamentally redemptive figure was to be the reader, who was already the true and only source of the otherwise mythical unity of the text, and whose constitutive role in the making of *écriture* would now be revealed and accepted. 'The birth of the reader', Barthes concluded, 'must be at the cost of the death of the Author.'

Such were the main lines of Barthes's 'La mort de l'auteur'. Without doubt that essay was one of the stimuli for Foucault's lecture 'Qu'est-ce qu'un auteur?', delivered early in the following year (1969); yet Foucault delicately avoided mentioning Barthes by name. Instead he framed his discussion as a response to certain criticisms which had been levelled at his own *Les Mots et les choses*—criticisms which, he admitted, were partly justified.[10] In that book, published in 1966, he had bypassed 'the question of the author'; concerned as he was with 'discursive layers' rather than with 'the familiar categories of a book, a work, or an author', he had carelessly 'employed the names of authors [. . .] in a naive and often crude fashion' (pp. 113, 115). This, he explained, had opened the way to various misunderstandings of his enterprise. The nature of that enterprise would shortly be clarified by *L'Archéologie du savoir*, which was at that moment in press. 'Nevertheless,' he went on, 'as 'a privileged moment of individualization in the history of ideas, knowledge, and literature, or in the history of philosophy and science, the question of the author demands a more direct response' (p. 115).[11] And 'Qu'est-ce qu'un auteur?' comprised that response.

Foucault proposed to examine the author 'as a function of discourse', replacing the conventional figure of 'the author' with what he called 'the author-function'—a concept which sought to capture the discursive role played by that figure. One might paraphrase his argument by saying that it is precisely the author-function which *authorizes* the very idea of 'an author'. Foucault developed this novel conception chiefly with reference to the seemingly simple case of 'a book or a series of texts that bear a definite signature' (pp. 131, 136). Even at this 'level' the phenomenon of authorship acquired in Foucault's hands an

[9] Notice incidentally the shifting valuation attached to the figure of the 'modern'. Modernity was initially associated with the falsehood of the author ('the Author is a modern figure', etc.); but now, through the liberation supplied in recent times by linguistics, modernity is aligned with the recovery of writing's truth.

[10] Michel Foucault, *Les Mots et les choses: une archéologie des sciences humaines* (Paris: Gallimard, 1966); trans. by A. Sheridan as *The Order of Things* (New York: Random House, 1970).

[11] Cf. Michel Foucault, *L'Archéologie du savoir* (Paris: Gallimard, 1969); trans. by A. Sheridan as *The Archaeology of Knowledge* (London: Tavistock, 1972).

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unexpected complexity; but he went on to show that still further considerations applied in the cases of Marx and Freud, who were not just authors of works but 'initiators of discursive practices'. Indeed, it emerged that the concept of the 'author-function' would require some further elaboration to embrace such '"fundamental" authors', for Foucault explained that 'the enigmatic link between an author and his works'—the premiss of the author-function—took a distinctive form with respect to psychoanalysis and Marxism.[12] Nevertheless, he indicated that the 'author-function' concept applied not only to the author of 'an ordinary text' but also to 'initiators of discursive practices' such as Marx and Freud. Ultimately, therefore, the authority of even Marx and Freud was derived from the author-function—so Foucault was suggesting, even though he abstained from demonstrating this concretely.[13] Thus, in harmony with the arguments of *Les Mots et les choses* and of the forthcoming *L'Archéologie du savoir*, the apparent sovereignty of authors concealed the real source of authority, namely discourse itself. Correspondingly Foucault too, albeit in a different way from Barthes, was seeking to herald a new, post-authorial culture. To this end he opened and closed his discussion with a quotation from Beckett: 'What matter who's speaking?' No longer should we bend our ear to the supposedly personal voice of the named, individual author; instead, we should attend to the anonymous murmuring of the collective *discours* (pp. 115–16, 138). Hence the transmutation performed by Foucault's very title. The figure of the author was turned from a 'who' into a 'what'—though strangely enough, the rhetorical question which presaged a future of glorious anonymity came from a named author, Beckett.

On the face of it, the argument of Foucault's 'Qu'est-ce qu'un auteur?' seems closely akin to that of Barthes's 'La mort de l'auteur'.[14] Certainly the two pieces shared several paradoxical gestures: the fact that the author's death was itself an *authored* event, requiring the authorial signatures of Barthes and of Foucault; the selective privileging of certain chosen authors such as Mallarmé and Beckett, who were apparently exempted from the death sentence; the seeming ambiguity as to whether Barthes and Foucault were signing a death warrant, carrying out an assassination, or preaching at a funeral. Yet these resemblances are misleading, for as we shall soon begin to see, Foucault took considerable pains to distance himself from Barthes—not least by criticizing both the traditional concept of the literary 'work' (which Barthes had effectively left intact), and the new concept of *écriture* (which Barthes had installed in place of 'the Author').[15] And in fact Foucault's essay had a significance of its own, in at least three respects.

[12] With respect to the use of the word 'works' in the phrase 'the enigmatic link between an author and his works', cf. below, pp. 354–55.

[13] See further below, p. 348.

[14] This is how these two essays are depicted in Banfield's otherwise illuminating 'Écriture, Narration and the Grammar of French', *passim*, esp. pp. 14, 19–21. The arguments of the two are distinguished, though only in passing, by Lamarque, 'The Death of the Author', p. 319, and by Donald E. Pease, 'Author', in *Authorship*, ed. by Burke, pp. 263–76 (p. 272). A complementary case is that of Burke, *Death and Return*, who treats the two separately (pp. 22–27, 78–89), at the cost of suppressing the dialogue between them (this in line with his general strategy, defended p. 178 n. 30).

[15] See Section 2 below (pp. 344–48).

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In the first place, whereas Barthes had sought to criticize and to supersede the author-figure, Foucault worked instead to *problematize* that figure, i.e. to make 'the author' the site of an enquiry. And there is reason to believe that he thus exerted a significant influence upon literary and philosophical theories of authorship, at least in the Anglophone world. Already, in the early 1960s, Wayne Booth had introduced the concept of the 'implied author', but the latter figure was conceived as an authorial construction. In contrast Foucault posited the author-figure as a construct of the reader; and the interpretative space which he thereby opened has since been peopled by a series of constructivist conceptions of the author—first Alexander Nehamas's concept of the 'postulated author', then Gregory Currie's theory of the 'fictional author', and latterly Jorge Gracia's figure of the 'interpretative author'. These conceptions of authorship, which have attained a new level of sophistication in Gracia's formulation, only became thinkable thanks to Foucault's essay.[16] Secondly, Foucault was *extending* the problem from imaginative literature to the domain of non-fictional writing—as he implied in his opening remarks, where (as we have seen) he defined 'the question of the author' as 'a privileged moment of individualization in the history of ideas, knowledge, and literature, or in the history of philosophy and science'. This move was rather less explicit than the first: indeed, for the most part Foucault oddly elided the distinction between such domains, gliding effortlessly from the arts to the sciences, between Homer and Galileo.[17] Nevertheless, his extension of the author question was also potentially fecund—although commentators on the sciences have only recently begun to take up the opportunity which Foucault thus created.[18] Thirdly, 'What is an Author?' played a significant part in constituting the new figure of '*the text*' which was already emerging at the time, and which was to gain ascendancy in the 1970s and 1980s. Not only did Foucault deploy that figure throughout his lecture; more particularly, his critique of the concepts of 'the work' and of *écriture* helped to propel Barthes himself into taking up more systematically the figure of 'the text'. In 'La mort de l'auteur', as we have seen, Barthes had counterposed the 'text' against the 'book' (equivalent to the 'work'), but only in passing and without thematizing the contrast between these.[19] But in 1971 he devoted a new polemical piece, 'De l'œuvre au texte', to just this distinction—and in doing so took on board the very criticisms which Foucault had raised in 1969.[20] Barthes now proposed that the category of 'the Text' should displace the traditional

[16] Booth's concept was used allusively by Foucault ('What is an Author?', p. 129). See Wayne C. Booth, *The Rhetoric of Fiction* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1961); Alexander Nehamas, 'The Postulated Author: Critical Monism as a Regulative Ideal', *Critical Inquiry*, 8 (1981), 131–49 (p. 136); id., 'What an Author is', *Journal of Philosophy*, 83 (1986), 685–91; id., 'Writer, Text, Work, Author', in *Literature and the Question of Philosophy*, ed. by Anthony J. Cascardi (Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1987), pp. 265–91; Gregory Currie, *The Nature of Fiction* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), pp. 79–83, 117 n.; Jorge J. E. Gracia, 'Texts and their Interpretation', *Review of Metaphysics*, 43 (1990), 495–542; id., 'Can There be Texts without Historical Authors?' *American Philosophical Quarterly*, 81 (1994), 245–53. Cf. further n. 79 below.

[17] Cf. p. 341 above. For an exception see p. 349 below.

[18] Steve Woolgar, 'What is a Scientific Author?', in *What is an Author?*, ed. by Biriotti and Miller, pp. 175–90.

[19] See above, p. 341.

[20] Roland Barthes, 'De l'œuvre au texte' (1971), repr. in *Le Bruissement de la langue*, pp. 69–

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concept of 'the work'; and this new figure of 'the Text', dignified with the capital letter, effectively replaced the figure of *écriture* which he had deployed in his earlier essay.

It appears, then, that Foucault's 'Qu'est-ce qu'un auteur?' was the oblique link between those two Barthesian classics, 'La mort de l'auteur' and 'De l'œuvre au texte'. Indeed, Barthes had every reason for revising his claims in the light of Foucault's lecture—for in the prefatory section of that lecture, after referring as we have seen to his own *Les Mots et les choses*, Foucault had demolished the argument of Barthes's 'La mort de l'auteur'. This initial phase of Foucault's discussion merits attention not only because it opened the space for his own argument, but also as a remarkable rhetorical achievement in its own right.

2. *Counter-History*

It will be recalled that Barthes had approached the author problem by sketching a history of authorship. Foucault, in contrast, began by making it clear that while he was well equipped to produce a history of his own, he would not here be undertaking that task:

> For the purposes of this paper, I will set aside a sociohistorical analysis of the author as an individual and the numerous questions that deserve attention in this context: how the author was individualized in a culture such as ours; the status we have given the author, for instance, when we began our research into authenticity and attribution; the systems of valorization in which he was included; or the moment when the stories of heroes gave way to an author's biography; the conditions that fostered the formulation of the fundamental critical category of 'the man and his work'. For the time being, I wish to restrict myself to the singular relationship that holds between an author and a text, the manner in which a text apparently points to this figure who is outside and precedes it. (p. 115)

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As Foucault's prefatory discussion proceeded, it seemed as if he was indeed eschewing the historical tactic which Barthes had adopted. Yet in fact his introductory remarks were devoted precisely to rebutting the history which Barthes had put forward; and within their seemingly non-historical form Foucault subtly constructed what we may call a *counter*-history, i.e. a radical reworking of the story Barthes had told.[21]

In Barthes's story, writers such as Mallarmé had failed to dethrone the usurping figure of the Author; and accordingly it required the assistance of linguistics, and of course the courage of Barthes himself, to redeem writing from its tragic fall. But in sharp contrast, Foucault argued that *literature itself* had *already* brought about what he called the 'disappearance of the author', i.e. 'the total

77; English translation by Stephen Heath, 'From Work to Text', in Barthes, *Image Music Text*, pp. 155–64. For a critical discussion of this essay see Sutrop, 'The Death of the Literary Work'.

[21] The following observations have been prompted by the remarks of Donald E. Pease ('Author', p. 272), who has rightly drawn attention to the disparity between Foucault's argument and that of Barthes. On the present reading, however, it would appear that Pease's account is inaccurate in taking Foucault's use of the present tense in his title as an index of this disparity.

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effacement of the individual characteristics of the writer'.[22] Indeed, this was the point of his opening allusion to Beckett:

> Beckett supplies a direction: 'What matter who's speaking, someone said, what matter who's speaking'. In an indifference such as this we must recognize one of the fundamental ethical principles of contemporary writing. (pp. 115–16)

Developing this theme, Foucault turned to what he called 'the kinship between writing and death'—a kinship which, he explained, 'inverts the age-old conception of Greek narrative or epic, which was designed to guarantee the immortality of a hero' (pp. 116–17). This original, protective function of narrative was not confined to the Greeks, for in a similar way 'Arab stories, and *The Arabian Nights* in particular, had as their motivation [. . .] this strategy for defeating death' (p. 117). In both Greek and Arab culture, then, narrative had begun as 'a protection against death'; but in 'our culture' this relationship has been inverted, for writing now annihilates its own author. To illustrate this claim, Foucault used the triad Flaubert–Proust–Kafka:

> Writing is now linked to sacrifice and to the sacrifice of life itself; it is a voluntary obliteration of the self that does not require representation in books because it takes place in the everyday existence of the writer. Where a work had the duty of creating immortality, it now attains the right to kill, to become the murderer of its author. Flaubert, Proust, and Kafka are obvious examples of this reversal. (p. 117)

This picture has not only pressed further Foucault's counter-history, but has also outflanked Barthes's use of the figure of authorial death; for by assigning that figure to literature itself, Foucault has deprived Barthes's argument of its putative originality. The 'murderer' of the author is not Barthes but 'our culture', instanced by the writing of Flaubert–Proust–Kafka. The extinction of the author, then, far from being an event of the future which requires the aid of linguistics (as it was depicted in Barthes's little history), has already been achieved by the hand of literature itself.

Correspondingly, Foucault has constructed a very different temporality from that deployed by Barthes—though in doing so, he has created some glaring gaps. On the one hand, the figure of the present has been radically redefined: the conjoined figures of Beckett, Flaubert, Proust, Kafka have together defined a single cultural moment, which Foucault calls 'our culture' (p. 117), or 'the writing of our day' (p. 116). To link Beckett with Flaubert in this way is precisely to negate Barthes's picture of an imperfect, incomplete progress from Mallarmé to the present; for Flaubert was Mallarmé's near-contemporary, just as Beckett is the contemporary of Barthes and of Foucault. Similarly Proust has been reassigned: Barthes had positioned him as one of those who had striven without success to achieve the 'death of the author', but Foucault includes him within the roll of authors who have actually brought about the author's 'disappearance'. Yet on the other hand, this redefined present is attended with a double uncertainty. In the first place, one individual is curiously absent from Foucault's picture, namely Mallarmé himself. Surely Foucault's counter-history will require him to reposition Mallarmé, for Mallarmé was a crucial figure in Barthes's history,

[22] Foucault, 'What is an Author?', pp. 117 ('effacement', 'death or disappearance'), 119, 120, 121 ('disappearance'); cf. n. 26 below.

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serving as he had to initiate, however imperfectly, that movement which would culminate with Barthes's own argument; yet on this matter Foucault has so far been silent, for Mallarmé's name is absent from his pantheon. Secondly, his counter-history is signally incomplete, carrying a profound void at its very heart. For Foucault has opened up a massive gap between the Graeco-Arabic moment, in which writing warded off death or its implications, and 'our culture', in which writing is itself annihilation; across that gap he has posited an inversion; yet he has offered no hint as to how or when this inversion took place. In short, where Barthes had offered a narrative, Foucault has merely posited a structural contrast: his counter-history, having no principle of motion within it, has left unexplained the origin of 'the writing of our day'.

Leaving these problems implicit and in suspense, Foucault now proceeded to draw the practical moral which flowed from his counter-history. Since imaginative literature had already accomplished the 'disappearance or death of the author', it followed that the 'task of criticism' was not to bring about this event—as Barthes had of course been claiming[23]—but, on the contrary, to catch up with what literature had achieved: that is, to 'explore' the 'consequences' of the author's disappearance, to 'appreciate' the 'importance of this event', to 'take full measure' of it (pp. 117, 119). However, Foucault went on, this necessary enterprise was being obstructed by certain idioms of contemporary criticism. One such idiom was the traditional category of 'the work', and more particularly the paradoxical retention of that category in recent structuralist criticism: 'if some have found it convenient to bypass the individuality of the writer or his status as an author to concentrate on a work, they have failed to appreciate the equally problematic nature of the word "work" and the unity it designates' (p. 119).[24] Another unhelpful 'thesis' was the much more recent 'notion of *écriture*'; for this concept, 'as currently employed', had 'merely transposed the empirical characteristics of an author to a transcendental anonymity'.[25] In a nicely ironic and reflexive touch, which was surely not lost on his auditors at the Collège de France in February 1969, Foucault refrained from naming the contemporary author who was pre-eminently associated both with structuralist criticism and with the 'conception of *écriture*': that is, Roland Barthes.

But Foucault's master stroke came in the final paragraph of his prefatory discussion:

> This conception of *écriture* sustains the privileges of the author through the safeguard of the a priori; the play of representations that formed a particular image of the author is extended within a grey neutrality. *The disappearance of the author—since Mallarmé, an event of our time*—is held in check by the transcendental.[26] Is it not necessary to draw a line between those who believe that we can continue to situate our present discontinuities

[23] However, Barthes's stance entailed that he himself could no longer be a critic, since as we have seen he depicted 'the Critic' as collusive partner of 'the Author'. This ambiguity, like that associated with modernity, was left unresolved in 'La mort de l'auteur'. Cf. p. 341 above.

[24] On this point see Section 4 below (pp. 354–56).

[25] Banfield seems to read this passage as directed not against Barthes but instead against subsequent Anglophone misunderstanding of Barthes's conception: 'Écriture, Narration and the Grammar of French', pp. 19–21.

[26] A point of detail is that Foucault used the phrase 'disappearance of the author', in place of Barthes's 'death of the author'—though initially he combined the two, writing of 'death or disappearance'. See n. 22 above.

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within the historical and transcendental tradition of the nineteenth century and those who are making a great effort to liberate themselves, once and for all, from this conceptual framework? (pp. 119–20, emphasis added)

Thus the pivotal figure of Mallarmé, whom Foucault had been holding back until this moment, has now been played as the trump card: it was Mallarmé who had brought about the 'disappearance of the author' in the first place. And this completes and confirms Foucault's counter-history, resolving the other issue which he had left in silent suspense: for the 'inversion' of the relationship between writing and death has now been assigned a historical location and a cause, in the person of Mallarmé himself.[27] Admittedly, this counter-history has left a potentially troubling gap between Graeco-Arabic narrative and the Mallarméan inversion, eliding as it does most of the trajectory of Western literature; but this problem has been concealed from view by its dispersal through the text. What matters is the radical re-evaluation of Mallarmé, who has been positioned within the present, within 'our time'. Conversely, Barthes himself has been consigned to the past, to 'the historical and transcendental tradition of the nineteenth century'; his concept of *écriture*, far from heralding a new dawn, has compounded the author problem by reinscribing it in a still more mystified form. In short, Barthes's history has been turned on its head: Mallarmé, whom Barthes sought to cast in the role of inadequate precursor, had in fact been far ahead of him in the first place. The final indignity for the unfortunate Barthes is that Foucault has preserved his apocalyptic tone, while snatching from him the banner of the future. For it is Foucault, not Barthes, who is 'making a great effort to liberate [himself], once and for all,' from the 'conceptual framework' of 'the nineteenth century'.

Having thus swept Barthes away, Foucault could now proceed to develop his own treatment of what he called 'the question of the author'. He began by problematizing the author's name, in order to set up his central thesis: that 'the function of an author is to characterize the existence, circulation, and operation of certain discourses within a society' (p. 124). This claim served to introduce the heart of his lecture, i.e. a sketch of four characteristic 'features' of the 'author-function', defined with reference to the case of 'books or texts with authors'. Next (pp. 131–36) Foucault proceeded to a 'schematic' discussion of the more complex problems raised by 'the initiation of discursive practices' (p. 136), i.e. the distinctive form of authorship associated with the paternal figures of Marx and Freud. Finally, in a brief concluding passage (pp. 136–38), Foucault linked his argument with a series of wider themes: the analysis of discourse; the question of 'the privileges of the subject' (p. 137); and the anonymity of discourse which he envisaged for the future, an anonymity evoked by recalling his earlier quotation from Beckett: 'What matter who's speaking?' (p. 138).

In examining Foucault's argument, I shall be concerned in particular with two themes which permeated his discussion, yet which he never considered directly: the figure of the *text* and the *individual identity* of the author. It will be

[27] Notice, in addition, that Foucault has inverted the *form* of Barthes's history: Barthes had proceeded in chronological order, but Foucault has moved from Beckett backwards to Mallarmé.

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convenient to proceed analytically rather than sequentially, since each of these topics appeared and reappeared at several different sites within Foucault's lecture. Nevertheless, the structure of his exposition will be taken into account, for as we shall see, that structure itself played a significant rhetorical role. One section of Foucault's lecture will be left aside here, his discussion of Marx and Freud, the 'initiators of discursive practices'. That passage has been omitted from consideration for two reasons. In the first place, it was at a tangent to Foucault's main argument—for as has already been mentioned,[28] Foucault did not explain how the authority and originality which characterized Marx and Freud was to be assigned to the 'author-function'. Secondly, this part of Foucault's essay has already been treated in exemplary fashion by Burke, who has brought out forcefully its fundamental *aporia*: that is, the fact that to install Marx and Freud as 'initiators of discursive practices' was to undermine the posited sovereignty of discourse itself. Thus this particular passage in Foucault's 'What is an Author?' strikingly exemplifies Burke's wider argument: that 'the principle of the author most powerfully reasserts itself when it is thought absent', that 'the concept of the author is never more alive than when thought dead'.[29] And indeed the discussion which follows, while complementary to Burke's, will lead in directions which are entirely compatible with his conclusions.

3. *The Author and the Text*

In his introductory remarks, when demarcating the limits of 'What is an Author?', Foucault tied 'author' strictly and reciprocally to 'text'. As we have seen, his essay would be concerned with 'the singular relationship that holds between an author and a text, the manner in which a text apparently points to this figure who is outside and precedes it' (p. 115). And yet after some further preliminary observations (which I shall be considering in Section 5), he broke this link, implicitly redefining the meaning of 'text'. 'In our culture', he observed at the end of his prefatory discussion,

> the name of an author is a variable that *accompanies only certain texts to the exclusion of others*: a private letter may have a 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. (p. 124, emphasis added)

By this stage of Foucault's exposition, then, a text no longer implied an author; rather, a text amounted simply to *anything written or printed*. Correspondingly—and this was the point—the 'author-function' was associated not with the text as such, but rather with *some* texts.

The core of the essay—now duly limited to 'those books or texts with authors' (p. 124)—consisted of an exposition of four specific 'characteristics of the "author-function"' (p. 130). After explaining these four 'characteris-

[28] See above, p. 342.
[29] Burke, *Death and Return*, pp. 6, 7; cf. p. 362 below.

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tics' in turn, Foucault summarized them as follows (for convenience, I have numbered and listed them):[30]

> [1] the 'author-function' is tied to the legal and institutional systems that circumscribe, determine and articulate the realm of discourse;
> [2] it does not operate in a uniform manner in all discourses, at all times, and in any given culture;
> [3] it is defined not by the spontaneous attribution of a text to its creator, but through a series of precise and complex procedures;
> [4] it does not refer, purely and simply, to an actual individual in so far as it simultaneously gives rise to a variety of egos and to a series of subjective positions that individuals of any class may come to occupy. (pp. 130–31)

Such was Foucault's overview of the four 'characteristics of the author-function'. I shall now examine the respective passages which these four points summarized, in order to bring out both Foucault's explicit argument and the shifting uses to which he put the figure of the 'text'.

Of these four 'characteristics' the first two were not so much descriptive as circumstantial, designed to show that the author-function was historically contingent and mutable. The point of [1] was that the author-function is connected with transgression, with punishment, and with property, and in particular with the 'legal codification' of authorship which took place around 1800 (pp. 124–25).[31] Under [2] Foucault argued that the figure of the author was imposed at different historical periods upon 'scientific texts' on the one hand and upon 'text[s] of poetry or fiction' on the other (pp. 125–27). As this latter point implied, the historical observations Foucault was making in [1] and [2] were not connected with the succession of *epistemes* which he had depicted in *Les Mots et les choses*, nor for that matter with the literary counter-history he had offered earlier in his lecture. On the contrary, as he had made explicit at the outset,[32] Foucault was not concerned to construct even so much as the sketch of a history. Rather, the two claims he was making here were (as he put it) 'transhistorical', and his historical allusions were serving a merely illustrative purpose.[33] Foucault's real concern was with the author-function in the present age: the role of his historical examples was simply to establish first the legal associations of the author-function (i.e. [1]) and then its contingent quality (i.e. [2]). Far more important, then, were [3] and [4], for these depicted the concrete and practical working of the author-function.

In developing [1] and [2], Foucault was still deploying the figure of the text, and using this to refer to (in the words of my own earlier gloss) anything written or printed. Yet by the time he came to offer the summary quoted above, the figure of the text had become curiously marginal, appearing only in [3] and even

[30] Under [3] the published English translation begins 'it is not defined by'; I have replaced this with 'it is defined not by'.

[31] Nesbit's otherwise incisive analysis is thus inaccurate in claiming that 'Foucault did not call in the law to supply answers to his essay question, "What is an Author?"; oddly, he did not even mention it.' See Molly Nesbit, 'What Was an Author?', *Yale French Studies*, 73 (1987), 229–57 (p. 240), partially repr. in *Authorship*, ed. by Burke, pp. 247–62 (p. 255).

[32] Cf. p. 344 above, at the start of Section 2.

[33] This is confirmed by the fact that Foucault inserted, in a qualifying parenthesis (pp. 126–27), some brief remarks (shrewd and interesting in themselves) about the varieties of both literary and scientific authorship in the present day.

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there in an almost liminal role. How this had happened will become clear as we examine the way that he had elaborated points [3] and [4]. The key moment of Foucault's discussion was point [3]. He began with a negative claim: 'The third point concerning this "author-function" is that it is not formed spontaneously through the simple attribution of a discourse to an individual' (p. 127). It should be observed in passing that this negation—whose significance will soon emerge—was rephrased in Foucault's later summary, where (*inter alia*), 'discourse' was replaced with 'text'. The implied-yet-unarticulated equivalence between discourse and text raises troubles of its own,[34] but as we shall see, this was but one of the difficulties surrounding Foucault's use of the figure of the text. Foucault continued:

> It results from a complex operation whose purpose is to construct the rational entity we call an author. Undoubtedly, this construction is assigned a 'realistic' dimension as we speak of an individual's 'profundity' or 'creative' power, his intentions or the original inspiration manifested in writing. Nevertheless, these aspects of an individual, which we designate as an author (or which comprise an individual as an author) are projections, in terms always more or less psychological, of our way of handling texts: in the comparisons we make, the traits we extract as pertinent, the continuities we assign, or the exclusions we practise. In addition, all these operations vary according to the period and the form of discourse concerned. A 'philosopher' and a 'poet' are not constructed in the same manner [. . .] (p. 127)

Here we have reached the heart of Foucault's argument: the figure of the author, for all that it is 'assigned a "realistic" dimension', is *an interpretative construct*, which arises from 'our way of handling texts'. That is to say, 'the author' of a text is categorically distinct from the historical individual who wrote that text, for all that the two bear—or seem to bear—the same name. We can now appreciate the force of Foucault's opening negation: it was designed to distinguish the 'creator' of a text (that is, the 'individual' to whom a discourse-or-text is attributed) from the corresponding author-figure. This distinction was of course implicit in Barthes's 'La mort de l'auteur'; but where Barthes had seen merely an obstacle to be overthrown, Foucault rightly perceived an explanatory problem. And he thereby opened the way to a new understanding of the meaning of authorship. Admittedly, the terms in which Foucault expressed this point were far from clear. It remained entirely ambiguous whether 'the' author-function was one phenomenon or several;[35] the very concept of the 'author-function' was never defined; and Foucault's account of that concept turned out, as we shall see, to be incoherent.[36] But in fact, the distinction he was drawing did not depend on the 'author-function' concept; indeed, it will

[34] In its usual Foucauldian reference, 'discourse' is transtextual: individual texts are merely its instances, or the sites of its manifestation. If 'discourse' is equated with 'text', the separate category of 'discourse' collapses. Nevertheless, the implied equivalence between the two was repeated under [4] ('What is an Author?', p. 129): cf. p. 353 below.

[35] This ambiguity was twofold, applying both over time and as between different 'discourses'. It became most explicit in its historical aspect, and specifically within [3], where Foucault observed that 'all these operations vary according to the period and the form of discourse concerned' and then immediately added that 'there are, nevertheless, transhistorical constants in the rules that govern the construction of an author' ('What is an Author?', p. 127; cf. p. 352 below).

[36] See p. 359 below.

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be more easily appreciated if we set that concept aside and rephrase the point in somewhat different terms.

The outlines of Foucault's distinction become clearer if we introduce the separate term 'the writer' to designate the historical individual who wrote the given text—as distinct from the author to whom we assign that text—and if we focus upon a specific example. For this purpose I shall take the case of the writer John Locke, who produced a number of works including *Two Treatises of Government* and *An Essay concerning Human Understanding*, and who died in 1704. The difference between 'writer' and 'author', in this particular case, can be indicated—partially and schematically—by the accompanying table.

Work	Writer	Author	Identity of author
Two Treatises	John Locke	Locke	Political philosopher
Essay	John Locke	Locke	Philosopher of knowledge

Observe, to begin with, that the name 'Locke' designates not one author but two, each with a definite identity—an identity which arises from the use to which we put the respective texts. One of these 'Lockes' is a political philosopher, who wrote the *Two Treatises of Government*; the other is a philosopher of knowledge, who produced the *Essay concerning Human Understanding*. Clearly it follows from this alone that each of these 'Lockes' is distinct from the writer John Locke. Correspondingly, writer and author do not have quite the same name: the writer was named John Locke, whereas both the 'political philosopher' and the 'philosopher of knowledge' are known simply as 'Locke'. Curiously—and as we shall later see, significantly—Foucault did not make this point; but it is in fact characteristic of authors, albeit with certain exceptions, that they are known by their surnames alone.[37] Again, John Locke wrote many other works, which fall outside the respective œuvres of both 'Locke'-the-political-philosopher and 'Locke'-the-philosopher-of-knowledge.[38] Further, John Locke died in 1704, whereas both of our two 'Lockes' are alive today—for we routinely assert that 'Locke argues', 'Locke claims', and the like.[39] In short, the author is indeed distinct from the writer, just as Foucault was claiming.[40] In fact the difference between them corresponds exactly to Michael Oakeshott's distinction between the '*historical past*', i.e. the past that has passed, and what Oakeshott calls the '*practical past*', i.e. the past as present in our culture.[41] Writers are bodily, mortal beings, who lived and died in the historical past. Authors, on the contrary, are living figures who inhabit the practical past; although they too may turn out to be mortal—for instance, it has been well observed that 'Addison and Steele are dead'—their death is not a bodily event but a cultural occurrence, the

[37] Cf. p. 358 below.

[38] See Ian Harris, *The Mind of John Locke* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994).

[39] See Adrian Wilson, 'What is a Text?', *Studies in History and Philosophy of Science* (in press).

[40] In my 'What is a Text?' this distinction is conveyed in different terms, using 'author' for 'writer' and 'virtual author' for 'author'. I have returned here to Foucault's usage, chiefly in an attempt to be as fair as possible to his account.

[41] See Michael Oakeshott, *On History and Other Essays* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1983), pp. 1–44 (particularly pp. 16–19, 34–44), 106; and Wilson, 'What is a Text?'

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mortality of particular canonical texts.[42] Conversely, it is precisely the life of the canonical text (such as the *Two Treatises*) which gives life to the author (in this case, Locke-the-political-philosopher). The characteristics of that constructed figure 'the author' arise, then—to return to Foucault's formulation—from 'our way of handling texts'. But what we must also notice is that this phrasing of Foucault's has transformed his picture of the relation between text and author; for it detaches the figure of the author from the figure of the text.

In the previous stages of his argument, Foucault had depicted the author-figure as being tied in one way or another to a text. But in the passage we are considering, this link between text and author has been broken; a text in itself does not 'point to' an 'author' (Foucault's first formulation), nor does an author's name 'accompany' a text (his second designation); rather, the author-figure arises from 'our way of handling texts'. Thus the figure of the author no longer inheres in a text; rather, it is superimposed upon it. Or to put this the other way around, 'texts' have now been depicted as innocent raw materials, *to which* we apply those interpretative procedures which construct the author-function. And this altered designation persisted as Foucault went on, in his elaboration of point [3], to argue that 'the rules that govern the construction of an author' show certain 'transhistorical constants' (p. 127). To illustrate this claim he invoked the example of literary criticism—suggesting that the concept 'author', as used in contemporary criticism, embodies a distinct set of 'critical modalities' which derive from early Christian exegetical theories such as those set out by St Jerome in *De viris illustribus*. Such principles as coherence and consistency, which served for Jerome as criteria for assigning authorship to texts, recur today (Foucault observed) in the repertoire of devices by which modern criticism ties texts to their authors: for instance, 'the author serves to neutralize the contradictions that are found in a series of texts' (pp. 127–29).[43] In this formulation, the connection between text and author is purely exterior; the figure of the author has no grounding in the text itself. Thus Foucault's exposition of point [3]—the fulcrum of his argument—has had the curious effect of eliding the issue with which he began, namely the bond between text and author, 'the singular relationship that holds between an author and a text, the manner in which a text apparently points to this figure who is outside and precedes it' (p. 115).

Indeed, Foucault's point [4], to which he devoted the next paragraph, was concerned with precisely this problem. He began by observing and rebutting the very implication just noticed:

> However, it would be false to consider the function of the author as a pure and simple reconstruction after the fact of a text given as passive material, since a text always bears a number of signs that refer to the author. Well known to grammarians, these textual signs are personal pronouns, adverbs of time and place, and the conjugation of verbs. (p. 129)

From these opening sentences of the paragraph it would seem that Foucault

[42] Brian McCrea, *Addison and Steele are Dead: The English Department, its Canon, and the Professionalization of Literary Criticism* (Newark, NJ: University of Delaware Press, 1990).

[43] The four attributes specified by Jerome were quality, coherence, consistency, and chronological compatibility.

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was now reverting to his original notion—that 'a text apparently points' to an authorial figure—and relatedly, that he was restoring the bond between text and author which had just been dissolved in the course of [3]. Specifically, that bond was now apparently supplied by the textual 'signs that refer to the author'—which Foucault designated, adapting Jakobson, as 'shifters'. Yet as it turned out, these 'shifters' do not in fact (according to Foucault's exposition) play quite this role. For Foucault at once went on to argue that in 'texts with an author' the 'shifters' are essentially *multidirectional* (pp. 129–30). More particularly, he claimed that 'all discourse that supports this "author-function"' reveals what he called a 'plurality of egos', which play different authorial roles. (To illustrate this point he used the examples of 'a novel narrated in the first person' (p. 129), interpreted with the aid of Booth's conception,[44] and 'a mathematical treatise' (p. 130); I shall take up a little later the concrete uses to which he put these instances.[45]) And he suggested that it is specifically from 'the division and distance' between these different 'egos' that the author-function arises. On this interpretation, to the extent that a text 'apparently points to' an authorial figure, it does so at most obliquely.

Meanwhile the same paragraph had effected a further subtle transformation. It will be recalled that in Foucault's initial formulation, 'text' was inherently tied to 'author', but that this was swiftly displaced by a second picture, in which 'the name of an author is a variable that accompanies only certain texts to the exclusion of others' (pp. 115, 124).[46] Now, under point [4], Foucault was seemingly reverting to his original construction; for as we have just seen, he asserted here that 'a text *always* bears a number of signs that refer to the author' (emphasis added). Yet in fact the matter was more complex than this. For Foucault at once proceeded to introduce anew the distinction between 'texts with an author' and 'those without one'—but he now drew a different line between these, thereby introducing yet a third formulation of the author–text relation. The opening of the paragraph, which was quoted above, continued thus:

> But it is important to note that these elements have a different bearing on texts with an author and on those without one. *In the latter, these 'shifters' refer to a real speaker and to an actual deictic situation*, with certain exceptions such as the case of indirect speech in the first person. When discourse is linked to an author, however, the role of 'shifters' is more complex and variable [. . .] (p. 129)

Thus texts (or discourse)[47] without-an-author are now connected with speech and with a deictic act, i.e. an act of demonstration. How are we to map onto this third formulation the examples of texts-without-an-author which were given in Foucault's second formulation—'a private letter', 'a contract', 'an anonymous poster attached to a wall'? No such mapping is possible, nor can we reconcile the assertion that 'a text always bears a number of signs that refer to the author' with either the second formulation or the third. Consistency is unattainable

[44] Foucault, 'What is an Author?', p. 129. Here Foucault referred to Booth's *The Rhetoric of Fiction* only allusively; the citation was supplied by the editor. Cf. above, at n. 16.

[45] Cf. p. 358 below.

[46] See p. 348 above.

[47] Cf. p. 350 above.

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here, for Foucault has successively used the word 'text' in three different ways: its meaning has slipped from *the authored*, through *the written*, to *the uttered*.

What has happened here? We have been witnessing two linked rhetorical moves. In the first place, 'author' and 'text' have been treated asymmetrically: in the very act of bringing the author into focus, Foucault has pushed the figure of the text outside the circle of his interrogation. Secondly, the sliding usage of 'text'—taking in along the way a half-suppressed synonymy with 'discourse' and, as we shall shortly see, with the literary 'work' as well—has deprived that term of any consistent meaning. And together these moves have conferred upon 'texts' a state of *innocence*, even as 'the author' has been depicted as essentially *fallen*. The figure of the author, carefully depicted as the product of our interpretative practices, contrasts strangely with the figure of the text, which has come to acquire the character of a quasi-natural object, a simple given. Correspondingly, and equally strangely, the assigning of authorship has at no point been depicted as having any effect on the status of texts themselves: that is, texts are curiously unaffected by the act of constructing an authorial figure. In short, the figure of 'the text' has slipped away, passing unnoticed beyond the analytical horizon.

4. *The Text and the Work*

And yet, for all this, Foucault *did* assign to the realm of the textual a condition corresponding to what I have called, in paraphrase, the fallen state of 'the author'. That condition he associated specifically with the concept of *the work*, which as we have seen he criticized in the course of his demolition of Barthes.[48]

> It has been understood that the task of criticism is not to reestablish the ties between an author and his work[49] or to reconstitute an author's thought and experience through his works and, further, that criticism should concern itself with the structures of a work, its architectonic forms, which are studied for their intrinsic and internal relationships. Yet, what of a context that questions the concept of a work? What, in short, is the strange unit designated by the term, work? What is necessary to its composition, if a work is not something written by a person called an 'author'? [. . .] If an individual is not an author, what are we to make of those things he has written or said, left among his papers or communicated to others? Is this not properly a work? (pp. 118–19)

Here Foucault was pointing out, quite correctly, that Barthes's critique of 'the author' entailed the need for a critical reappraisal of the category of 'the work'—and as we have seen, Barthes was indeed to take this point in his 'De l'œuvre au texte' of 1971.[50] Foucault went on to illustrate his case with a concrete example; remarkably enough, he chose for this purpose the 'works' of his own hero Nietzsche:

> Assuming that we are dealing with an author, is everything he wrote and said, everything he left behind, to be included in his work? This problem is both theoretical and practical.

[48] See p. 346 above.

[49] The phrases 'an author and his works' and 'the man and his work' (the latter in quotation marks) had also been introduced a little earlier, when they were instantly displaced by the phrase 'an author and a text' ('What is an Author?', p. 115, quoted above, at pp. 342, 344 respectively).

[50] See pp. 343–44 above.

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If we wish to publish the complete works of Nietzsche, for example, where do we draw the line? Certainly, everything must be published, but can we agree on what 'everything' means? We will, of course, include everything that Nietzsche himself published, along with drafts of his works, his plans for aphorisms, his marginal notations and corrections. But what if, in a notebook filled with aphorisms, we find a reference, a reminder of an appointment, an address, or a laundry bill, should this be included in his works? Why not? These practical considerations are endless once we consider how a work can be extracted from the millions of traces left by an individual after his death. *Plainly, we lack a theory to encompass the questions generated by a work* [. . .] (p. 119, emphasis added)[51]

Let us observe in passing that Foucault here raised an issue of signal importance which has subsequently come to receive increasing attention: that is, the point that the concept of 'the work' or 'the works' is a retrospective construct and, for the most part, a posthumous one, linked of course to the constitution of a textual canon.[52] But the striking feature of Foucault's remarks is that 'the work' here, in his prefatory discussion, is given exactly the same status as 'the author' will be assigned in the body of his lecture. Just as 'the author' is a constructed 'function' (not simply an existent or once-existent person), so 'the work' is a constructed entity (not simply a natural or empirical given); just as Foucault had begun by observing that 'the 'author' remains an open question' (p. 113), so here he pointed out that 'we lack a theory to encompass the questions generated by a work'. The figure of 'the work', then, comprises, or could comprise, the very term which was missing from Foucault's argument: that is to say, it supplies the textual correlate of 'the author'. Indeed, in the two passages where he used the word 'work' again, Foucault treated this as synonymous with 'text'.[53] Elsewhere, however, 'the work' was suppressed and Foucault played as we have seen with 'text'—first tying it to 'author', then loosening this bond, then seemingly tying it once again, only to dissolve it finally and decisively by merging the textual into the uttered. Correlatively, the 'questions generated by a work' were left unanswered: they had been posed precisely as rhetorical questions, specifically as a counter to Barthes, and this exhausted their role in Foucault's exposition.

In sum, Foucault's insight into the 'question of the author' was achieved at the price of a systematic blindness with respect to what we may call 'the question

[51] A similar point had been made in the previous year (1968) by Genette, in an essay entitled '"Stendhal"' (with quotation marks). See Gérard Genette, *Figures of Literary Discourse*, trans. by Alan Sheridan (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982), pp. 147–82. On Nietzsche's significance for Foucault see Burke, *Death and Return*, p. 96 (and cf. pp. 112–13).

[52] See e.g. Frank Kermode, 'Institutional Control of Interpretation', in his *Essays on Fiction 1971–82* (London: Routledge, 1983), pp. 168–84; Terry Eagleton, *The Function of Criticism from 'The Spectator' to Post-Modernism* (London: Verso, 1984); Jerome J. McGann, 'The Text, the Poem, and the Problem of Historical Method', in his *The Beauty of Inflections: Literary Investigations in Historical Method and Theory* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1985), pp. 111–32; Dale Spender, *Mothers of the Novel: 100 Good Women Writers before Jane Austen* (London: Routledge, 1986); McCrea, *Addison and Steele are Dead*; Gracia, 'Texts and their Interpretation'; John Guillory, *Cultural Capital: The Problem of Literary Canon Formation* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993).

[53] These were the comments on 'modern literary criticism' in relation to St Jerome ('What is an Author?', pp. 127–28), and the discussion of Marx and Freud (pp. 131–36; cf. above, at the end of Section 2). The same equivalence had also emerged earlier, at p. 115. On the relation between 'text' and 'work' cf. McGann, 'The Text, the Poem, and the Problem of Historical Method'.

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of the text'.[54] This imbalance reflected a threefold rhetorical asymmetry: the terminological split between 'work' and 'text', allied to the ambiguities of 'text' itself; the structural dispersal of 'work' and 'text' between frame and argument; and the gulf between the answered question concerning 'the author' and the unanswered question concerning 'the work'.

5. *The Author's Name, the Author's Individuality*

We have just seen that the aporetic quality of the figure of the text in Foucault's lecture arose not only from his shifting usage, but also from the dispersal of 'text' and 'work' within his essay. The complementary theme of *the author's name* reveals a similar dispersal; for this, like 'the work', was wholly encased within Foucault's prefatory discussion, and was thereby separated from the author-function itself. And as we shall see, this arrangement again had a rhetorical task to perform—in this case, helping to suppress the individuality of the author-figure.

Foucault presented the theme of the author's name as a pair of questions: 'What is the name of an author? How does it function?' (p. 121). The rhetorical structure of his response to these questions is interesting in its own right, for he began with a disclaimer ('Far from offering a solution, I will attempt to indicate some of the difficulties related to these questions'), and yet concluded with a series of positive theses (p. 123): an author's name 'serves as a means of classification'; it 'remains at the contours of texts'; its function is precisely the 'author-function' itself, namely, 'to characterize the existence, circulation, and operation of certain discourses within a society'. One might perhaps paraphrase this cluster of arguments by saying that the name of the author functions as a form of linkage between texts and discourses—though any such gloss would be hazardous, in view of the uncertain and overlapping reference of 'text' and 'discourse' in 'What is an Author?' It is also worth noting that it was at the conclusion of this passage that Foucault introduced his second formulation of the relation between 'text' and 'author'—the notion that 'the name of an author is a variable that accompanies only certain texts to the exclusion of others' (p. 124).[55] But these *telē* of the passage derived their force from Foucault's particular handling of the observations he made along the way.

Those observations were twofold. In the first place, the name of an author 'poses all the problems' of proper names in general, to wit, that such names 'oscillate between the poles of description and designation, and [. . .] they are not totally determined by either their descriptive or designative functions' (p. 121).[56] Secondly, an author's name leads to a series of additional difficulties of its own, since 'the link between a proper name and the individual being named and the link between an author's name and that which it names are not

[54] Cf. Paul de Man, *Blindness and Insight: Essays in the Rhetoric of Contemporary Criticism* (first published as a collection 1971; 2nd edn, revised, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1983), p. 16 and *passim*; and Wilson, 'What is a Text?'

[55] Quoted above, p. 348.

[56] Reading 'by either' for the translators' 'either by'.

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isomorphous and do not function in the same way'. That is, 'an author's name is not precisely a proper name among others' (p. 122). For example:

> It is altogether different to maintain that Pierre Dupont does not exist and that Homer or Hermes Trismegistus have never existed. While the first negation merely implies that there is no one by the name of Pierre Dupont, the second indicates that several individuals have been referred to by one name or that the real author possessed none of the traits traditionally associated with Homer or Hermes. (p. 122)

We might indeed pause to meditate both upon the fact that 'the author' is assigned a personal name, and upon the double significance—descriptive and designative—of personal names in general. What this twofold significance constructs, surely, is the *who*, i.e. the concept of personal *identity*, an identity which is inseparable from the name itself. It is precisely in the personal name that signifier and signified attain that fusion which is otherwise elusive yet is always being sought. The proper name, then, is doubly freighted with the notion of identity: in that to which it refers, and in the mode of its reference.[57] And to the extent that, as Foucault observed, 'the name of an author poses all the problems related to the category of the proper name', the author's name, too, carries this same significance. That is, an author is always and necessarily a named *individual*—as Foucault had made clear when defining the 'question of the author' in the first place.[58]

With these considerations in mind, let us observe Foucault's treatment of the author's name. We have seen that he depicted the author's name as both resembling the personal name and differing from it. These two aspects were initially in balance; but as this part of his prefatory discussion proceeded, the weight of his picture moved steadily towards a stress on the difference between authorial names and personal names. And eventually, at the culmination of the passage, he actually detached the one from the other:

> We can conclude that, *unlike a proper name*, which moves from the interior of a discourse to the real person outside who produced it, the name of the author remains at the contours of texts—separating one from the other, defining their form, and characterizing their mode of existence. (p. 123, emphasis added)

The point of this contrast, of course, was to clear the space for Foucault's subsequent distinction between (in my own paraphrase) writer and author. But his rhetoric here has effaced the zone of overlap between an author's name and a proper name; and this move merely replaces one mystery by another. Everyday usage conceals the *difference* between the name of the author and ordinary proper names; the strength of Foucault's analysis is that it has brought this difference to light. But the price that has been paid is to suppress the *resemblance* between the two—a resemblance which is in fact the very condition of the 'author-function', for it is precisely *as the bearer of a name* that 'the author' performs the cultural role which Foucault is attempting to disclose. So too Foucault has now, by the end of his prefatory passage, eliminated from his problem-space 'the link between an author's name and that which it names'

[57] Cf. Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, trans. by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1974), pp. 107–18.

[58] See pp. 341, 344 above.

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(p. 122, quoted above), and with it, all the associated issues concerning the concept of identity. As the sentence just quoted makes clear, the name of the author no longer either designates or describes; instead, it is to be characterized by its function, in the sense of its discursive effects. That is, of Foucault's two original questions—'What is the name of an author? How does it function?' (p. 121, quoted above)—only the second now survives.[59] It is precisely this functional nexus which will dominate the remainder of Foucault's paper: indeed, this is the very point of the term 'the author-function'.

This self-limitation of Foucault's treatment of the author's name perhaps makes intelligible a certain curious and ironic oversight in his whole discussion. Despite his concern to distinguish the author's name from ordinary personal names, and to demarcate the author from the writer, Foucault nowhere remarked upon the chief convention associated with authorial names: the fact that (as I have already remarked) authors are commonly known by their surnames alone.[60] That convention—which Foucault himself used ('Mallarmé', 'Beckett'), and by which I have here been designating him in turn—has several interesting features. It tends to be gendered (for until recently, women authors were usually assigned given names—Jane Austen, Emily Dickinson); it inverts the order of familiarity which prevails in daily life (the better we 'know' the author, the more we suppress the author's given name); it is associated, to a degree, with death; it shows various modulations and exceptions (for instance, consider the initialized twentieth-century male poets such as W. B. Yeats, T. S. Eliot, e. e. cummings). Here, then, is the site of a possible enquiry which would be concerned with the very themes that Foucault was opening up, and which would support the central distinction he was drawing. Yet Foucault did not even notice this phenomenon, much less thematize it. And we can take this as a symptom of the fact that he had suppressed the question 'What is the name of an author?', restricting his attention to the question 'How does it function?' Moreover, having here banished the author's name from consideration, Foucault later went on to abolish the author's *individuality*. He had of course begun from the premiss that the author-figure is an individual; and he retained this principle as he elaborated the first three 'characteristics of the "author-function"'.[61] But in the course of developing point [4]—that is, in his discussion of the various textual 'signs that refer to the author', or 'shifters'—Foucault eliminated the individuality of the author, as we shall now see.

This remarkable transmutation proceeded by two steps, corresponding to the two concrete examples that Foucault considered: 'a novel narrated in the first person', and 'a mathematical treatise' (pp. 129–30).[62] Using the first example, Foucault argued, as we have seen, that textual 'shifters' in fact point not to a single individual but rather to a 'plurality of egos'—and that it is from the 'division and difference' between these 'egos' that the author-function 'arises'. The textual 'plurality of egos', then, serves as the *occasion for* the author-

[59] Note that designation and description themselves were described as 'functions', but these were functions of a different kind—pertaining to signification rather than to efficacy.

[60] See p. 351 above.

[61] See e.g. the quotation at p. 350 above.

[62] Cf. p. 353 above.

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function, as the material upon which the author-function is based. By this means Foucault divided and pluralized the reference of textual 'shifters', while nevertheless implicitly retaining the individuality and integrity of the author-figure. But the next step of his exposition quietly transferred the responsibility for this 'division' from the textual 'shifters' to the 'author-function' itself. He now proceeded to the further example of 'a mathematical treatise', showing that here too a 'plurality of egos' could be detected—but his gloss depicted the 'plurality of egos' in such a text as the *product* of the author-function! Hence the conclusion which he reported in his summary of point [4]:

> [the author-function] does not refer, purely and simply, to an actual individual in so far as it simultaneously *gives rise to* a variety of egos and to a series of subjective positions that individuals of any class may come to occupy. (pp. 130–31, emphasis added)[63]

While the meaning of the latter clause—'a series of subjective positions that individuals of any class may come to occupy'—is (to this reader, at least) entirely unclear, the general bearing of the point is not in doubt: the author-function *does not refer to an individual at all*. The individuality of the figure of the author—the very premiss of Foucault's lecture—has now been erased. And this completes the move which Foucault had begun by suppressing from consideration the meaning of the author's name.

To recapitulate: what Foucault captured was the *constructed* nature of 'the author'; what his analysis buried was the *individuality*, the personal being and identity, of the author-figure. This was, of course, the inversion of what happens in conventional usage—appropriately enough, since Foucault's argument was pitched against that very usage. But what is striking is that this suppression of the author's personal being, far from being argued explicitly, was achieved by rhetorical sleight-of-hand. Furthermore, Foucault's concept of the 'author-function' degenerated, in the course of his own exposition, into incoherence. At first, under [3], he had portrayed the author-function as the product of the reader, and particularly of the critic (pp. 127–28). Then, within [4], he depicted the author-function as arising from the text—specifically from the 'division and distance' between the 'plurality of egos' associated with 'a novel narrated in the first person' (pp. 129–30). Yet as we have just seen, this posited relation was immediately inverted—for under the further example of 'a mathematical treatise', Foucault argued that the 'plurality of egos' arose not from the textual 'shifters' but instead from the author-function. In short, the 'author-function' variously appeared as cause and as effect, as arising from the text and as imposed upon it. The confusion which everyday usage effects between writer and author, and which Foucault had been at such pains to remove, was transferred in concealed form to the concept of the 'author-function': the 'author-function' came to inherit the original ambiguities of the author-figure itself.

These *aporiai* at the heart of Foucault's argument suggest that his attempt to turn the author-figure from a 'who' into a 'what' was doomed by its very nature. Certainly Foucault was unable to sustain in practice the vision he was seeking to construct; for in fact named authors were invoked at the strategic sites of his

[63] Cf. Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, p. 95.

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exposition.[64] The author-function itself was assigned an author, in the person of St Jerome. So too, as we saw earlier on, the author's 'disappearance' had its author: Mallarmé. And the 'direction' of Foucault's enquiry, the question 'What matter who's speaking?', was 'supplied' not by the murmuring of discourse but by a named author of the present day: Beckett.[65] Thus my analysis strongly supports Seàn Burke's tactical rewriting of Foucault's question, that is to say, the shift from '*what* is an author?' to 'what (*and who*) is an author?'[66] Burke's reformulation may be glossed as arguing that the *what*-question which Foucault posed turns out to entail, and necessarily so, the *who*-question which he suppressed;[67] and this is the result to which Foucault himself has unwittingly led us. The author-figure is indeed a construct, just as Foucault argued. But contrary to the accompanying thesis which he developed by covert means, the author-figure is constructed specifically *as a personal being*.

6. *Conclusion*

The signal achievement of Foucault's 'What is an Author?' was to reveal that the figure of the 'author' is an interpretative construct: a construct associated with canonical works, notionally identified with the writer of such works, but none the less categorically distinct from that writer. On the other hand, Foucault's discovery was masked to a considerable degree by the very terms in which he articulated it—above all, by his eliminating the author-figure's personal being. Yet as I shall go on to suggest, the attendant *aporiai* were not only of Foucault's own making, but also stemmed from difficulties inherent in the issues he was raising.

Foucault's attempt to write out the author-figure's individuality, and to raise in its stead the impersonal concept of 'the author-function', arose of course from the larger concern which dominated his writings of the late 1960s: namely, to establish the putative sovereignty of discourse. In 'What is an Author?' this effort was a radical failure, at several levels. We have seen that the suppression of the author-figure's name, individuality, and personal being rested upon a series of covert rhetorical manœuvres; that this suppression was self-defeating, since in fact it is precisely as a person that the author-figure is constructed; that the 'author-function' concept had no consistent meaning; and that Foucault himself was incapable of adhering to the stance which he was concerned to define. Further, Foucault's intended erasure of the author-figure's individuality was paradoxically at odds with his own wider purposes. For the larger question

[64] pp. 115–16, 138, 127; see Sections 1–3 above. It is possible that the writer Michel Foucault was aware of these ironies; but we may say that the *author* Foucault was/is not, since his text did not/does not draw attention to them.

[65] Indeed it might be said that the triad Jerome–Mallarmé–Beckett together comprise a unity, a conjoint emblem of authorship or of its history. Perhaps this triad corresponds to the triad past–present–future; or perhaps Mallarmé and Beckett together define the present, and the future is supplied by yet another author, namely Foucault himself (cf. p. 347 above).

[66] Cf. p. 339 above.

[67] This is, of course, by no means the only possible interpretation of Burke's question. For instance, we might take Burke as asking: to whom does Foucault reserve the privilege of authorship? The latter reading would be in line with Burke's focus on the Marx-Freud section of Foucault's lecture (see p. 348 above).

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he wanted to raise was 'the privileges of the subject' (p. 137); yet he had eliminated just those attributes which the author-figure shares with the figure of the subject.[68] But perhaps the supreme paradox pertained to the concept of 'discourse'; and here my reading joins hands with that of Burke. For what Burke's analysis reveals is that in the sovereignty which Foucault assigned to it, *discours* was neither more nor less than the hypostasis of the figure of the author. That is to say, what Foucault himself wrote of Barthes's *écriture*—that this concept 'has merely transposed the empirical characteristics of an author to a transcendental anonymity' (pp. 109–10)—applies with equal force, and with signal irony, to Foucault's *discours* itself.[69]

The key to this twofold hypostatization is the fact that both *écriture* and *discours* rested on the assimilation of writing to speech. Just as Barthes set up *écriture* by approaching a written text with the question 'Who is speaking thus?', so Foucault invoked the sovereignty of *discours* by applying to the written at large the question 'What matter who's speaking?'[70] In the case of *écriture* this manoeuvre is seemingly puzzling, since as Ann Banfield has observed, not only is *écriture* 'conceived in opposition to speech' but also the division between the written and the spoken is enhanced by the particular grammar of the French language.[71] But this apparent paradox is resolved if we attend to the rhetorical work which was being performed by Barthes's apprehension of the written as spoken. On Barthes's designation, *écriture* is 'the destruction of every voice, every origin'.[72] The irreducible contradiction inherent in this picture is that in order to play such a role, *écriture* must itself acquire the status of voice and of origin; and this was just what was achieved by apprehending the written under the sign of the spoken. In the most literal sense, then, *écriture* was the answer to the question 'who is speaking?' The very terms of Barthes's own rhetoric reveal that the figure of *écriture* was—as Foucault accurately observed—the concealed hypostatization of the author-figure.

In the case of *discours*, the rhetorical stroke of assimilating the written to the spoken was rather less paradoxical. For as Foucault's *L'Archéologie du savoir* made clear, the unit from which *discours* was to be reconstructed was the *énoncé*, the statement—and this concept itself merged writing into speech. Moreover, Foucault further explained that what he called 'remanence', that is to say, 'survival in time', is 'of the nature of the statement'.[73] This inherent property of 'survival in time' meant that the statement or *énoncé* was defined as the written-in-presence—which of course entails that the written is apprehended as speaking. But if Foucault's mode of fusing writing and speech was more transparent than that of Barthes, the effects of this move were similar in each case: what we have seen of Barthes's *écriture* is equally true of Foucault's *discours*. The very question 'what matter who's speaking?' unwittingly announces both that someone is 'speaking' and that it is speaking which 'matters'. Thus

[68] See the summary on p. 347 above, and for a penetrating discussion of the relationship between the two see Burke, *Death and Return*, pp. 104–15.
[69] Cf. p. 346 above.
[70] See pp. 340, 342 above.
[71] Banfield, 'Écriture, Narration and the Grammar of French', p. 2.
[72] Barthes, 'La mort de l'auteur', p. 61.
[73] See Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, p. 124.

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discours, like *écriture*, is assigned precisely the properties—voice and origin, agency and authority, presence and power—which have been so insistently removed from the figure of the author. In short, Foucault's rhetoric, like that of Barthes, bears out Burke's principal thesis: 'the principle of the author most powerfully reasserts itself when it is thought absent'; 'the concept of the author is never more alive than when thought dead'.[74]

There is also a further respect in which the present exploration has harmonized with Burke's argument. One of Burke's central insights is that Foucault, like Barthes, apprehended such themes as writing, authorship, language, and discourse within a larger vision of past, present, future, and their mutual articulation. That is to say, both Barthes (in his writings of *c.* 1970) and Foucault (in his 'archaeological' phase) deployed, each in his own way, an eschatology[75] and, linked with this, what I have elsewhere called a historical metaphysic.[76] And this is just what we saw at work in the Barthes–Foucault exchange over the death (Barthes) or disappearance (Foucault) of the author. The gesture with which Barthes consigned Mallarmé to the past was matched, in riposte, by Foucault's assimilation of Mallarmé to the present; in each case, what we make of Mallarmé is inextricably conjoined with what we make of ourselves. The sense of time at work in such a vision is by no means simply a matter of chronological sequence. For instance, Foucault could assign Mallarmé to 'our time' while also invoking 'our present discontinuities' and implicitly relegating Barthes to 'the historical and transcendental tradition of the nineteenth century': here, within a single gesture, the present is extended backwards in time (Mallarmé), is defined as a moment of rupture (discontinuities), and is depicted as burdened with the weight of a lingering past (Barthes). So too the culture of the nineteenth century appears both as heroic (Mallarmé) and as villainous ('the historical and transcendental tradition'). Thus in such a metaphysic, past and present are not points in a sequential array but evocative sites in an evaluative matrix.[77] Moreover, as Burke has shown, Foucault's vision of the sovereignty of discourse was intimately bound up with this larger metaphysic.[78]

Nevertheless, as has already been mentioned, the troubles which entangled Foucault's insight into the author-figure reflect not just his own particular metaphysical commitments but also the inherently refractory nature of the issue with which he was dealing. For it remains no easy matter to articulate and to clarify the central thesis which Foucault was advancing, i.e. the constructed nature of the author-figure. The difficulty arises not only because the issue of authorship extends across a large and complex field—embracing, for instance, both fiction and non-fiction, both descriptive and normative concepts[79]—but also, and

[74] Burke, *Death and Return*, pp. 6, 7, quoted above, p. 348.

[75] Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, pp. 22–27, 96, and *passim*.

[76] Adrian Wilson, 'A Critical Portrait of Social History', in *Rethinking Social History: English Society and its Interpretation, 1570–1920*, ed. by Adrian Wilson (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1993), pp. 9–58 (pp. 34–36).

[77] For analogous gestures on the part of Barthes see nn. 9, 23 above.

[78] Burke, *Death and Return*, ch. 2.

[79] (*a*) Foucault's 'author-function' applied indifferently to fictional and non-fictional authors and was descriptive in intent. (*b*) The 'postulated-author' concept of Nehamas and the 'fictional-author' concept of Currie pertain to fiction and have a normative aspect. For some discussion of

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more fundamentally, because we are here necessarily grappling with the boundaries imposed by our own conceptual figurations. All such figurations—not just 'author' and 'work' but also, for instance, 'text' and 'document', 'source' and 'evidence', 'past' and 'present'—prove extremely recalcitrant to elucidation, precisely because we normally get along by employing them unreflectively. This is well illustrated by the confusion attending the figure of the 'text'. As we have seen, 'text' proves to have been a densely aporetic term in 'What is an Author?' But this problem is by no means confined to Foucault's use of that figure. On the contrary, as I have shown elsewhere, the meaning of the figure of the text has remained obscure and elusive ever since it began to be applied—in a shift to which Foucault's 'What is an Author?' itself contributed—to the written-at-large.[80]

Working figurations such as 'text' and 'author', then, are bound up with what Heidegger called the *Vorhabe* of understanding, that is, the 'fore-having' which assigns-in-advance to the objects of understanding a particular mode of being.[81] And it is because they play this founding role, serving as the ground upon which interpretation proceeds, that such figurations prove so resistant to scrutiny. The most interesting promise of a rhetorical and aporetic approach is that such a strategy may help to illuminate not just theorizations such as those of Barthes and Foucault but also, and more fundamentally, the conventional figurations themselves.

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Nehamas's concept see Robert Stecker, 'Apparent, Implied and Postulated Authors', *Philosophy and Literature*, 11 (1987), 258–71. (*c*) The concept of the 'virtual author' (Wilson, 'What is a Text?'; cf. nn. 39, 40 above) relates to non-fictional authorship and is descriptive. (*d*) The same is true of the more complex conception of Gracia, who distinguishes between the 'composite author' (a figure which incorporates the contribution of editors), the 'pseudo-historical author' (the picture which we construct of the historical author), and the 'interpretative author' (the author whom we posit in the act of interpreting a text). See the essays cited in n. 16 above, and also Jorge J. E. Gracia, *A Theory of Textuality: The Logic and Epistemology* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1995); id., *Texts: Ontological Status, Identity, Author, Experience* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1996).

[80] Cf. pp. 343–44 above. On the ambiguity of 'text' in Barthes's writing see Annette Lavers, *Roland Barthes: Structuralism and After* (London: Methuen, 1982), pp. 176–77, and Sutrop, 'The Death of the Literary Work', p. 43; on its obscurity in general see my 'What is a Text?'

[81] Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time* (German original 1927; trans. by John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson, Oxford: Blackwell, 1962), pp. 191–95, particularly p. 193. Cf. Wilson, 'What is a Text?' For a different gloss on *Vorhabe* cf. Hubert L. Dreyfus, 'Holism and Hermeneutics', *Review of Metaphysics*, 34 (1980), 3–23 (pp. 10–11), and id., *Being-in-the-World: A Commentary upon Heidegger's 'Being and Time', Division I* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1991), pp. 199–202.

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